INSTITUTO
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DO PORTO
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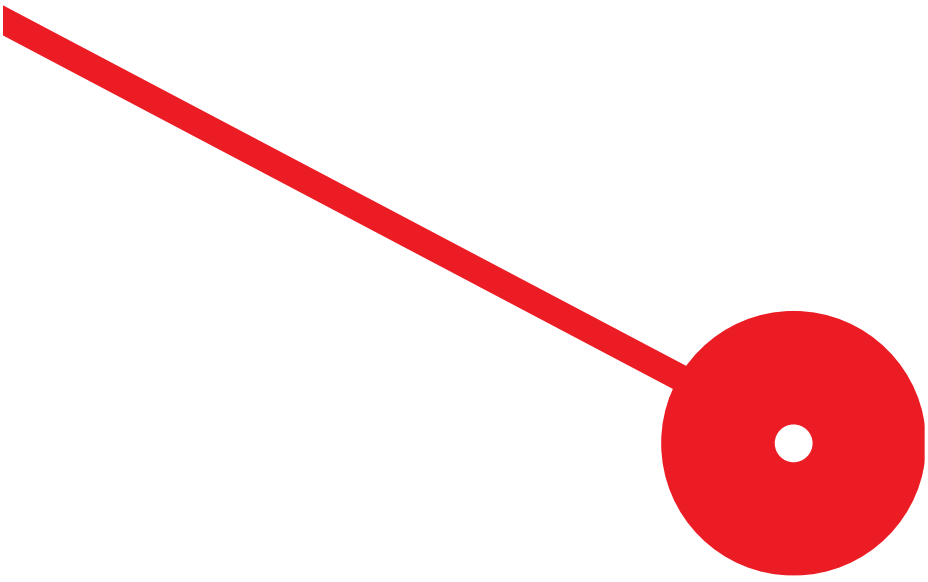
M MASTER'S DEGREE IN
INTERCULTURAL STUDIES FOR BUSINESS

Between Work and Belonging: Economic Pathways to Immigrant Integration — A Case Study on the Chinese Community in Portugal

Cármen Maria Vitorino Marques

10/2025



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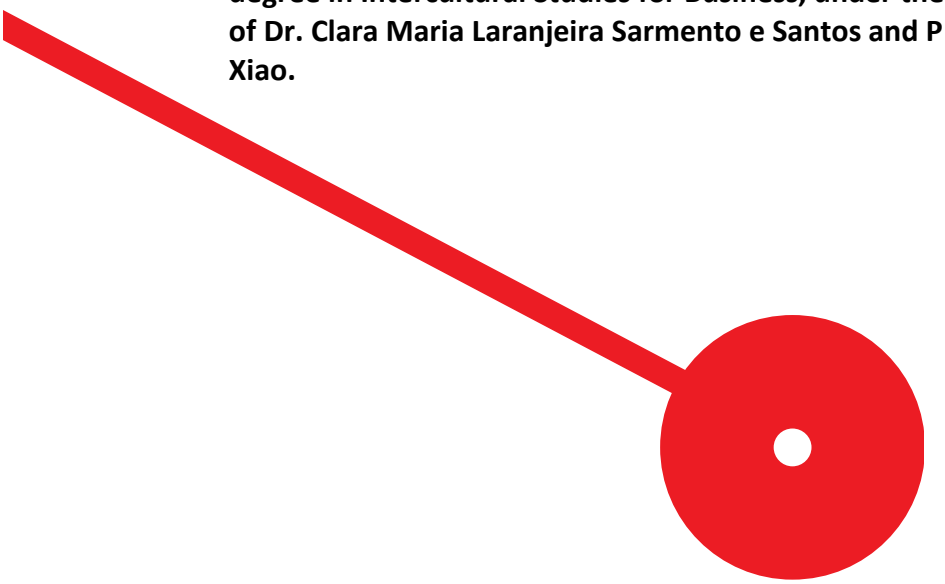
Cármen Maria Vitorino Marques

Master's thesis submitted to the Accounting and Business School of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto for the attainment of a Master's degree in Intercultural Studies for Business, under the supervision of Dr. Clara Maria Laranjeira Sarmento e Santos and Professor Han Xiao.



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Dedication

Para o meu avó, que sempre foi maior do que a vida.

Para os meus pais, por manterem a porta aberta.

Para a minha irmã, por me ensinar a ser.

Obrigada nunca será suficiente.

Wherever you go, there you are.

Agradecimentos

Escrever esta tese foi impossível, um dia certa de que ia entregar, o dia seguinte de que ia desistir. Nesses momentos serviram-me os grupos de pessoa que tenho a honra de ter na minha vida, que me carregaram até ao fim e me empurraram até eu passar a meta. Sem vocês nada disto teria acontecido.

Aos meus pais, que tiveram paciência infinita a lidar comigo e com os meus dramas, e aguentaram ouvir o meu teclado horas e horas a fim sem reclamarem. Tudo aquilo que eu alguma vez fizer tem sempre de ser creditado a vocês, porque se não fosse pelo vosso apoio incondicional, nunca teria feito nada. Também fica uma palavra para a minha irmã, que é a minha maior cheerleader. Ainda quero ser como tu quando for grande.

Aos meus amigos, pessoas tão especiais, que me fizeram esquecer dos problemas quando as coisas estavam más, e me incentivaram sempre que estava em baixo. Obrigada por acreditaram sempre que eu ia chegar lá, mesmo quando eu não tive a certeza. Especial enfâse ao grupo das minhas amadas study sessions, sem as quais eu teria enlouquecido em casa. E um especial agradecimento à Rosa, pela paciência eterna para todas as minhas perguntas, e à minha querida Carolina, que é sempre a voz da razão nos meus piores momentos.

E para a estrelinha que agora está no ceú, meu querido Boss, continuo a sentir o conforto das memórias contigo em todos os momentos. Para a outra estrelinha, que está sempre atenta, todo isto foi para ti, espero que estejas orgulhoso.

Para terminar, um enorme agradecimento às minhas orientadoras, a Professora Clara Sarmento, pela sua dedicação incansavel nas aulas e em garantir que estavamos o melhor preparados possível para esta enorme aventura, e a Professora Han Xiao, pelo acompanhamento e por se ter disponibilizado para fazer esta loucura ao meu lado.

Este percurso foi marcado por pessoas maravilhosas, e se há alguém que merece reconhecimento por esta tese, são elas. Obrigada por tudo, para sempre.

♥

Resumo:

Esta dissertação investiga a integração económica e social dos imigrantes, focando-se particularmente em dois caminhos distintos mas complementares: a atividade empreendedora e a participação no mercado de trabalho. Os imigrantes contribuem não apenas para a sua própria mobilidade socioeconómica, mas também para a economia nacional em geral, sendo a sua integração moldada por interações complexas entre os quadros políticos e as perceções sociais. Ao analisar as políticas de migração a nível da UE e nacional, a presente investigção examina de que forma os regulamentos estruturais e sociais influenciam o acesso dos imigrantes ao emprego, destacando obstáculos como a burocracia, a segmentação do mercado de trabalho e os preconceitos sociais.

Para compreender como estes dois caminhos influenciam a integração, este estudo combina uma revisão das teorias e políticas de migração e integração com investigação qualitativa adicional, baseada em entrevistas semiestruturadas com empreendedores imigrantes, trabalhadores e atores relevantes nos setores empresarial e laboral.

Os resultados revelam que a atividade empreendedora não só proporciona aos imigrantes rendimentos e independência financeira, como também promove redes sociais, envolvimento comunitário e acesso a oportunidades económicas mais amplas. A participação no mercado de trabalho, por sua vez, contribui para o desenvolvimento de competências, aquisição de língua e interação com as comunidades locais, reforçando a integração social. Os entrevistados destacaram tanto desafios estruturais (como barreiras burocráticas e discriminação) como fatores facilitadores, incluindo redes empresariais de apoio e práticas inclusivas nos locais de trabalho.

A combinação de dados quantitativos e qualitativos sugere que o envolvimento económico dos imigrantes tem um impacto mensurável na criação de emprego, no desenvolvimento de negócios e no crescimento económico local, confirmando que a sua integração beneficia tanto os indivíduos como a sociedade em geral. Ao ligar experiências individuais a resultados económicos mais amplos, esta dissertação oferece uma compreensão aprofundada de como os imigrantes se integram na sociedade portuguesa através da atividade económica.

Palavras chave: Integração, empreendedorismo, participação no mercado de trabalho, imigração

Abstract:

This thesis investigates the economic and social integration of immigrants, with a particular focus on two complementary pathways: entrepreneurial activity and labor market participation. Immigrants contribute not only to their own socioeconomic mobility but also to the broader national economy, yet their integration is shaped by complex interactions between policy frameworks and societal perceptions. By analyzing migration policies at both EU and national levels, this research examines how regulatory environments influence immigrants' access to employment and the creation of businesses, highlighting barriers such as bureaucratic obstacles, labor market segmentation, and social prejudice.

To understand how these two pathways influence integration, the study combines a review of migration and integration theories and policy, with additional qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with immigrant entrepreneurs, employees, and stakeholders in the business and labor sectors.

Findings reveal that entrepreneurial activity not only provides immigrants with income and financial independence but also fosters social networks, community engagement, and access to broader economic opportunities. Labor market participation, meanwhile, contributes to skill development, language acquisition, and interaction with local communities, reinforcing social integration. Interviewees highlighted both structural challenges (such as bureaucratic barriers and discrimination) and enabling factors, including supportive business networks and inclusive workplace practices.

Combined quantitative and qualitative insights suggests that immigrants' economic engagement has a measurable impact on employment generation, business creation, and local economic growth, confirming that their integration benefits both individuals and the wider society. By linking individual experiences with broader economic outcomes, this thesis provides a nuanced understanding of how immigrants integrate into Portuguese society through economic activity.

Key words: Integration, entrepreneurhsip, workforce participation, immigration

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Abbreviation List

EU – European Union

CEAS - Common European Asylum System

EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum

ETIAS - European Travel Information and Authorisation System

IMF - International Monetary Fund

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

SME - Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

OECD - Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

NFP - Net Fiscal Position

INE – Instituto Nacional de Estatísticas/Statistics Portugal

AIMA – Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo/Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum

SEF – Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras/Service for Foreigners and Borders

CCILC – Câmara de Comércio e indústria Luso-Chinesa/Portugal-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCILC).

PRC - People's Republic of China

IVA – Imposto sobre o Valor Acrescentado/Value-added tax

AICEP – Agência para o Investimento e Comércio Externo em Portugal/Agency for Foreign Investment and Commerce in Portugal (AICEP)

INTRODUCTION

The topic of migration has been a controversial one, even more so in recent years with the unstoppable increase in globalization, exacerbated by the ever-increasing ease of movement created by technological advancements achieved in the 21st century. Far from being a peripheral phenomenon, it has emerged as a structural factor that influences politics, culture and economic development. In Portugal specifically, migration has played a dynamic role, where the country saw changes over the years. Historically a land of emigration, it now has also become an attractive destination for different people who are looking for employment, security and opportunities far from home.

This recent increase in migration has led to many debates and policy changes over time. People are now more than ever debating the topic of migration and how it affects host societies, and much of that discourse tends towards the economic side, covering security issues or threats to job opportunities. What part of the debate focuses on matters of integration veers more towards the issues of said integration, or how its' difficulties are hard to overcome, not necessarily on the effects of it or it can be achieved in a sustainable way.

This type of discourse is the most popular, as it is a high interest field for the general public, given its' eye-catching news titles and increasingly divisive political discourse. This trend tends to overshadow other important topics that should be considered when contemplating migration. It focuses most of the attention on a small part of what is the immigrant experience and makes it central, disregarding other important points to consider, such as net contributions to the economy, the overall state of the host population and how an entry of young working age people can help with the ageing rates and with filling jobs where the market needs more professionals. It also removes the person from the immigrant, placing them as a number or a quota primarily.

These depersonalized and decentralized narratives obscure the lived realities of individuals and the multifaceted ways in which they contribute to society. In doing this, public and political debates often emphasize social and cultural tensions, implying an "us" and a "them", framing integration primarily as a matter of language or cohesion, when it is more than that. It also tends to leave out the way in which migrants shape and can even help sustain local economies. Beyond their presence as workers, migrants act as consumers, entrepreneurs, and taxpayers, inserting themselves into the economic and social fabric of their host countries. Their businesses often serve as bridges between cultures, introducing new products and generating employment both within and also

beyond their communities. Yet these contributions frequently go unacknowledged in mainstream narratives, which too often reduce migration to a question of management.

Existing research has shown that migrants participate actively in the labour market, filling critical gaps in key sectors facing shortages. Yet far less attention has been paid to the entrepreneurial and business activities of migrants, despite the fact that these could serve as powerful modes of integration. Entrepreneurship in particular not only provides economic self-sufficiency, but also fosters cross-cultural interaction and community development into everyday life.

Economic participation through work and business is a matter of livelihood, but also a key factor in shaping how societies perceive, value and ultimately understand and include immigrant groups. Recognizing the role of these communities offers a more comprehensive understanding of migration, one that integrates both its social and economic dimensions. This is the perspective that guides the present research.

Existing studies on migration in Portugal have largely examined integration through social and institutional lenses. However, there remains a need to understand how migrants' participation in the labour market and in entrepreneurship operates as a pathway to integration within host communities. This gap in the literature stresses the need to examine migration dynamically, considering various basis (social, cultural, economic), rather than focusing on an individual one.

Building on this, the aim of this thesis is to explore the integration of immigrants through the lens of business and entrepreneurship. It seeks to understand how migrants in Portugal engage with the host society not only as workers but also as business owners, and how such participation influences their integration. By emphasizing the economic contributions of migrants, this research also challenges dominant narratives that view migration primarily as a social or political issue. It contributes to academic discussions on integration and migration economics while providing insights that may inform more inclusive public policies and foster a more nuanced understanding of the immigrant experience.

The main aim is understanding, through research and qualitative interviews, how business activity and economic participation function as a pathway for the integration of Chinese migrants in Portugal. It will also explore the ways in which these two forms of participation contribute to the overall integration of migrants, while also analysing the

impact of institutional and bureaucratic frameworks, and whether they facilitate or hinder this process. Understanding how participating economically affects integration will be one of the key findings of this thesis, as well as giving space for personalized real-lived experiences to be heard at an academic level.

CHAPTER I – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND EXISTING POLICY

The definition of integration is something that is hard to fully pin down. In the same sense that immigration and social trends are fluid and ever changing, the definition of what it means to be integrated, to belong, must also shift accordingly. The adaptability of the concept is one of its most defining characteristics. In an attempt to further determine what cultural integration is, many theories have been developed over time, which approach the subject from various standpoints.

Firstly, it is important to differentiate between social integration and economic integration. While both are of great importance, the frameworks are fundamentally different.

1.1 Social Integration Theories

The social theories that focus on migrant integration all share similar main analysis points, in spite of their divergence in perspective and ultimate conclusions. Each theory will provide unique insight into cultural adaptation, identity formation and social cohesion, providing a multifaceted understanding of what integration entails.

By examining different theoretical approaches, it becomes clear that integration is not a linear process with a fixed goal in mind. Instead, it is a process of continues development, bargaining and participation. Understanding these different perspectives and why they all exist is imperative in understanding the growth of the term.

Within this context, three theories will be analysed: multiculturalism, assimilation and transnationalism. These theories were chosen based on their range. By considering all three, we can effectively look into the three most common scenarios presented when one considers migrant social integration. Multiculturalism defends that people should be allowed to maintain their own culture and traditions when integrating into a new society, while assimilation goes for the opposite side of the spectrum, claiming that people need to give up one culture for the other in order to be fully integrated into their new society. Transnationalism then takes on the role of the "middleman" between both theories, arguing in favour that people will always have ties to both cultures. By analysing these three options, a fuller picture on the subject becomes available, as the theories are also representative of the different discourses that come up when discussing migration. ~

1.1.1 Multiculturalism theory

The concept of multiculturalism is one that has suffered the most changes over the years. It is the one that the general public is more likely to have heard before, even if only due to the association that it has to the term "multicultural". This means that it is important to distinctly differentiate between the two.

The crux of the difference is that "any society that consists of heterogeneous cultural groups is multicultural; however, not all multicultural societies have adopted multiculturalism" (Safdar et al., 2023, p. 2)

Multicultural is a descriptive term. It is used to refer to a society where multiple cultural groups coexist amongst each other. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, is more of an ideological concept. It is more used as a political basis, where action can be built upon the ideas of the ideology. It has also "been regarded as a defence of cultural pluralism and diversity, protecting the characteristics and unique contributions of a range of cultural and minority groups" (Johansson, 2022, p.76), meaning that people should be accepting of the differences of others in the name of coexisting amicably. Even more so, it means that these differences should be protected and recognized as something essential to the continued peace of a multicultural society. To solidify and finalize this idea, Charles Taylor, Canadian philosopher who spent much of his career attempting to understand how people form their identities, stated in his seminal work *The Politics of Recognition* (1994) that recognition is essential in shaping identity: "Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (p. 25). This reinforces the idea that multiculturalism, at its core, seems to defend. That people should be allowed to exist in their cultural conditions, and that those conditions and differences should be actively acknowledged and undisturbed.

Multiculturalism as a political and ideological theory first became prominent in the 1970's, where nations, such as Canada and Australia, where looking to establish multiculturalism as a pillar of their identity (Safdar et al., 2023). The Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 is a strong example of this, wherein Canada implemented a "multiculturism policy" in an attempt to "[preserve] and [enhance] the multicultural heritage of Canadians" (*Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, 1985). The scope of this act mandated that an individual should experience freedom to maintain their cultural heritage

and to celebrate it, and it also meant that being a so called “multicultural nation” was also now connected to the Canadian identity.

And this was the original meaning of the concept, the idea that people from different backgrounds and cultures should be able to coexist and maintain their own ideologies while sharing the same space of those who did not. Assimilation should not be goal, the idea of tolerance and equal rights should triumph all.

Theoretically, this would be a near perfect scenario, which was one of its main issues. This ideology has been deeply and expansively criticized by portraying an image of “perfect acceptance reality” that is not attainable.

“Multiculturalism tends to assume a utopian character” (Sarmento, 2014, p. 607), especially given its predisposition to believe that groups will passively coexist and integrate without the need for deeper engagement, negotiation and conflict resolution. The critique that “multiculturalism has been passive, fearing that promotion of any sense of commonality or belonging would tend towards assimilation and loss of group identities” (Cantle, 2016, p.145), is an understandable one. Multiculturalism has the potential to be actually quite divisive. The idea that people should retain their own values and culture with minimal engagement can create a sort of “other” mentality, where integration does not occur and people live side-by-side without interacting. This concern highlights that multiculturalism is near becoming a superficial model, if it does not go beyond simple tolerance and venture into participation.

The most prominent discontent with this theory was expressed by then German Chancelor Angela Merkle, who famously stated in her speech to the to the Junge Union in 2010 that multiculturalism had “utterly failed" (as cited in *The Guardian,* 2019). This was in the context of rising anti-immigration feelings at the time, where Merkle stated that not enough was “being required of immigrants in the past and repeated her argument that they should learn German” (Weaver, 2010). This heavily emphasized that merely allowing different cultural groups to exist side by side does not lead to true integration, and that the theory had not facilitated the social cohesion that had been hoped for.

Summarizing, while multiculturalism advocates for the preservation of cultural diversity within a shared society, it has faced critiques for its perceived passive nature in fostering true integration. A case can be made that, without discussion and finding of communal ground, multiculturalism risks deepening divisions rather than encouraging cohesion. To

further develop this and grasp how other approaches can be taken in the challenge of integration, the next section will focus on what is essentially the antithesis of multiculturalism: assimilation.

1.1.2 Assimilation theory

In contrast to the ideals of multiculturalism, the theory of cultural assimilation takes a very different path. This theory mainly "promotes the existence of one common cultural group in society, where ethnic minorities and migrants are expected to adopt the mainstream culture while completely rejecting their own" (Batkhina et al., 2022, p. 370).

The idea is that the end goal of integration should be a homogenous society that works on the basis of finding common ground in which to build an identity. This can take different forms, as the theory has evolved with the passage of time and influence of discussion.

The initial belief that assimilation meant that immigrants would relinquishing their own culture in favour of a more dominant one has since been debunked as an oversimplification of a nuanced subject. Although original conceptualizations had viewed this process as a kind of one-way street, more contemporary opinions have developed this concept into something that blurs together cultures, as opposed to erasing one in favour of the other.

By most standards, some degree of assimilation is seen as a necessary effort in the attempts of integration. "Adaptation to the new society is the first step towards integration" (Cormoș, 2022, p. 5), and it is oftentimes something that comes out of necessity rather than true desire. This necessity-driven assimilation is often shaped by external structural factors, such as economic survival, social acceptance or general legal requirements. Immigrants could feel compelled to conform to a dominant culture's norms due to labour market demands, where being proficient in the host society's language or having a deep formative understanding of the workplace culture is required. This can be true for entry level positions as well as more advanced career options. And this phenomenon is not only limited to the workplace. The ability of individuals to access common resources (such as education and healthcare) can also depend on the ability of said individual to navigate the dominant cultural framework.

Additionally, the social dimension of assimilation is also significant. It has been found that there is a "desire on behalf of the host population for immigrants to adopt the host culture and become culturally similar" (Alcott & Watt, 2017, p. 11). And this external pressure can be detrimental when deciding on how to interact with other members of a society. The fear of social exclusion or discrimination, of being perceived as an outsider, can lead to the default adoption of traits from the dominant culture, as a defence mechanism. Considering this, assimilation can occur not as a voluntary renouncing of one's background, but as a response to external pressures. Overall, while there is the end goal of a more cohesive and connected social structure, it is important to keep in mind the context that facilitates that cohesion.

However, while assimilation remains a dominant point of discussion with regards to migrant integration, it still does not fully encapsulate the complexities of migration in an increasingly globalized and ever-changing world. Most migrants will not simply transition from one cultural identity to another, they will instead maintain strong ties to their country of origin while simultaneously engaging with their host society and adapting in a more organic way. This phenomenon, known as transnationalism, challenges the idea that integration requires one singular cultural association, focusing instead on emphasizing how migrants navigate multiple social, economic, and political spaces cross-culturally.

1.1.3 Transnationalism Theory

The idea of transnationalism is deeply intertwined with the concept of globalization. Never before has there been such ease of commerce, travel and relocation among various nations. Not only that, current technological developments in the digital landscape (such as instant messaging applications and social media) have also allowed for a new level of connection with which most people were not familiar before. This ease of communication has facilitated the connection between people in a local context, as well as a global one. This is relevant because transnationalism exists off of the back of this movement. Suddenly, it was easier to connect with the community where you lived and worked, finding shared experiences and learning about the everyday life of those who are foreign to you, and on the other hand, it was also easier to maintain connections with what might be considered "home", or the culture of origin.

On their pivotal 1992 work, Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton define transnationalism as the

> process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. […] We came to understand that the multiplicity of migrants' involvements in both the home and host societies is a central element of transnationalism. Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns within a field of social relations that links together their country of origin and their country or countries of settlement. (p. 4)

This perspective challenges traditional assimilationist and multiculturalist models by emphasizing that migration is not simply an erasure or denial of one culture in favour of the other. As an example, migrants may send financial help home, participate in political discussions in their home and host country, or maintain cultural traditions while also adapting to their host society's norms. This would suggest that modern migration should be viewed not as a transition from one fixed identity to another, but as an ongoing process of negotiation between these different influences.

This, as is to be expected, is not a unifying perspective. If we look at one of the most evident examples of transnationalism, the concept of dual citizenship, it is clear to see that opinions on the matter are split. Not all countries allow it, while others allow it with some exceptions, and the reasons seem to vary. Looking at Japan as an interesting example, given that there was recently a controversial lawsuit, ended in 2024, swinging in favour of the government. While the plaintiffs argued that the Japanese rule of permitting only one citizenship "violates fundamental human rights related to the pursuit of happiness, self-determination and identity" (Kaneko, 2024), the judge stated that there was reason to the law. The argument was made that it exists to prevent potential issues that could exist when one belongs to more than one nation, especially those related to "diplomatic protection, military service obligations and taxation" (Exum, 2023).

This Japanese perspective, which is not unique worldwide, would signify that there are still nations that hold a vested interest in limiting their cultural acceptance. While transnationalism acknowledges migrants' ability to maintain ties across borders, some nations actively limit this possibility. When the Japanese government orders dual citizens to choose a nationality by the age of 22, they are clearly taking a stance in favour of national cohesion over transnational belonging. Such restrictions are often justified on

practical grounds (concerns over taxation, voting rights, military obligations, etc). This stance further implies that citizenship can still be viewed as a controlling and exclusivity measure. It reveals a sort of tension between individual identity and institutional demands, where identity is not negotiable.

This discourse goes to show that the negotiation of culture and what that means for each individual is not linear, and it also shows the fragility of the theory. While it is defended that this would be an ideal scenario, the reality is often not as simplistic as "blending identities together". Migrants will be heavily influenced and restricted by the existing policy of their country of origin or even their host country.

Given the current social and technological climate, it is understandable to see how this theory has taken shape and gained traction. The advancements made towards affordable travel and open digital communication have allowed migrants to keep meaningful connections across borders and outside of what would originally be their cultural and living bubble. However, the theory can fail to consider that not all migrants are equally positioned to benefit from these opportunities. Not only in terms of policies but also considering socioeconomic conditions and bureaucratic processes with which migrants are not inherently familiar. Moreover, the theory might not properly look into the experiences of migrants who have moved not because they wanted to, but because they felt they had no other alternative.

Migrants who move under pressure, whether they are fleeing conflict, persecution, environmental disasters or extreme poverty, may not have the safety, stability or even the resources to sustain regular cross-border ties, which are a given in this theory. Similarly, structural and bureaucratic barriers can limit opportunities for mobility or communication (restrictive visa regimes, lack of dual citizenship, complicated work permits, or even limited access to digital technologies). Additionally, socioeconomic restrictions must also be considered as migrants with limited income or time may find it impossible to travel, invest in long-distance relationships, or maintain previous rituals. In short, while the theory often presumes that migrants are empowered, mobile, and capable of bridging multiple societies, the lived realities of many reveal uneven access to these opportunities, highlighting a critical gap between theoretical assumptions and everyday experiences.

These theories have a wide span, and they shape how host societies perceive immigrants. A political environment that favours assimilation may impose different expectations and

barriers compared to one that embraces multiculturalism. And these perspectives can influence anything from labour market policies to entrepreneurial opportunities, and social mobility opportunities. Having now established the main theories on the cultural spectrum, it will now be easier to understand the expectations that migrants face, and also to analyse how society can react to their existence.

1.2 Economic integration theories

While cultural integration theories offer valuable insight into how migrants navigate identity, they do not fully explain the practical, day-to-day realities of integration. For many migrants, successful settlement is not only about cultural adaptation but also about economic participation. Accessing stable employment, building financial independence, and contributing to the host society's economy are key factors for the overall integration of any person. It is also especially relevant in the case of migrants when considering that many people who are able to make the choice to migrate do it in search of better job and life opportunities.

While cultural theories look into the questions of "Could I belong here?", economic theories focus more on the "Could I make a living here?" side. Understanding this difference is crucial, because integration is not just about feeling at home, it is also about having the tools to live, work, and thrive in the host country. The theories presented in this section will serve as an attempt to create a more robust and nuanced perspective on migration as a whole.

1.2.1 Human Capital Theory

Over the course of a lifetime, people will acquire unique experience, skills, and knowledge. This is what is widely understood as human capital, since one "cannot separate a person from his or her knowledge, skills, health, or values the way it is possible to move financial and physical assets while the owner stays put" (Becker, 1994, p. 16).

There are several factors that can come into consideration when discussing this facet of integration. It is not simply a matter of schooling techniques being different, these are intrinsic differences that can apply to any person and distinguish them from any other person. Factors like family, language proficiency, prior work experience, education, medical care, and so furth, fundamentally shape us as people are invaluable in determining our human capital.

Applying this to economic integration, the theory assumes a direct correlation between the level of human capital an immigrant possesses and their capacity to economically integrate into the host society. The mentioned assets are all considered key when discussing the theoretical employability of immigrants and their competitiveness in the labour market. Recent reports have found that migrants who arrive with high levels of education and host-country language skills tend to assimilate more rapidly into the economy (Fasani, 2024). Higher success rates of labour market integration are found in these cases, meaning that an association between higher human capital and employability can be drawn.

This viewpoint would suggest that a policy approach more focused on creating opportunities for human capital development would be beneficial to both migrants and to host societies. If the approach centres around providing language classes or on credential recognition for positions and studies performed outside of the host society, migrants would be much more easily integrated in the economy, allowing them to more quickly become available to work and reduce market entry barriers, which would also be of interest to the host country, as it is preferential to have economically active migrants to fill labour market demands than migrants who cannot make use of their skills. The inverse is also, of course, a possibility. If a host society places low priority in providing language classes, or places high restrictions on the recognition of foreign credentials, migrants will face harder challenges to integrate into the work force, despite already having the human capital of experience and education.

This limitation is one of the main criticisms of this theory. The focus on human capital alone inconsiderately ignores the systemic challenges that disproportionally affect migrant communities. Issues such as discrimination, legal constraints and the devaluation of skills and qualifications acquired in foreign countries make up for a challenging experience for those wanting to integrate into a new economy. For example, “Where immigrants’ skills are not fully transferable to the destination country, they would be expected to have more years of schooling than native-born workers employed in the same job” (Chiswick & Miller, 2009), which indicates that having the human capital is not enough if it will not be acknowledged by the host society. Moreover, recent evidence shows that almost 40% of non-EU citizens employed in the Europea Union are overqualified for their job, which is nearly twice the rate of nationals (Eurostat, 2024). This means that the human capital theory can explain why some migrants find success,

but it fails to substantially discuss those who face difficulties in spite of having the apparent skills and experience.

However, it is important to acknowledge that, overall, the theory affirms the value of immigrants in their own development paths. It ultimately defends that people have inherent value due to their experiences and history.

1.2.2 Social Capital Theory

While the human capital theory focused on the value of people considering their experiences, the social capital theory focuses instead on their communities and the support they provide. In a broad definition, social capital refers to the resources accessible through networks of relationships that enable individuals to achieve mutual benefits, and this can refer to families, communities, social classes, parties, among others (Bourdieu, 1986). In a migration context, it can help to explain why some individuals or groups struggle more or less than others in spite of their level of effort. It could be linked to their position within their surrounding social networks.

The literature distinguishes between three forms of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. These three types are distinctive in their direction of the relationships, and are determined by whether the social ties connect similar people, different groups or individuals to institutions.

"Bonding social capital refers to the relationships and social networks that connect individuals who are similar in terms of their social identity" (Zhang et al., 2024, pp. 2-3), which corresponds to families, close friends, groups who share the same ethnicity or even religious groups. These networks often provide initial support, such as housing, employment information or emotional availability, proving critical in the early stages of migration. However, it is important to note that in the context of migration, overreliance on these networks can limit broader interaction, while simultaneously enforcing ethnic enclaves. This is because people will become comfortable in the groups that are familiar to them, not feeling the need to venture out as much, as they already feel well supported as they are.

Bridging social capital connects migrants with members of the wider host community, facilitating language acquisition, cultural understanding, and access to employment beyond ethnic networks (Zhang et al., 2024). On the contrary of bonding social capital,

which is highly homogenous, the kind of social capital is much more heterogeneous, implying connections between the host society and the migrants, and it also is more often associated with positive integration outcomes.

Both forms reviewed so far are consider informal ties. Linking ties are different, in the sense that they are largely of a "vertical nature involving relationships between organisations and individuals that either work within organisations or are connected to them" (Ratnam et al., 2022, p. 268). These connections are crucial, as they play a role in providing formal resources and rights.

Taken together, these forms of social capital illustrate that integration is shaped not only by interpersonal connections, but also by the quality and scope of those ties. Migrants who expand from bonding toward bridging and linking networks should theoretically be better positioned to engage in economic and social participation. This dynamic is particularly important in the sphere of entrepreneurship, where social capital functions not only as a resource base, but also as a pathway to integration. In the labour market, social capital often determines entry points and career progression, given that bonding ties may provide initial access to informal jobs or community-based employment, while bridging and linking ties open pathways to formal work, skill recognition, and upward mobility. The composition of migrants' social networks thus directly affects the degree to which their economic participation translates into broader social integration.

Considering this, the social capital theory overall underscores that integration is not solely a linear process of adaptation based on the perceived value of an individual and what their skills are. Integration should therefore also be considered a relational and network-driven process.

1.3 Current migration and integration policy

As touched upon on some of the discussed theories, the integration of immigrants into host societies does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped and constrained by a layered governance structure in Europe, where EU-level frameworks intersect with national sovereignty. The European Union has developed policies and directives on various areas of migration topics, such as policies that address the entry, residence, and rights of migrants, where the Common European Asylum System, the Blue Card Directive, or the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion are relevant. These policies seek to harmonize standards across member states, but ultimately all countries have their own sovereignty,

and integration remains of mostly national competence, and countries often design policies according to their own political cultures, demographic needs, or public pressures. Hungary, for instance, continuously rejects the EU's mandatory migrant quota system, citing security concerns and public discontent. Such divergences highlight the ongoing tension between EU harmonization efforts and domestic political realities.

Within this landscape, the labour market and private sector interests emerge as crucial influencing forces. This section explores the range of migration policies at both EU and national levels, before turning to the growing role of business and labour in shaping integration discourse and outcomes.

1.3.1 Overview of Current Migration Policies

Europe's migration policy framework operates on two separate levels: supranational coordination (through EU channels) and national policy, where member states are free to individually exercise their plans. This structure ensures that the sovereignty of member states is not jeopardized, but it also means that oftentimes there is tension between what is a shared and private state interests, as discussed.

At an EU level, one of the most ambitious attempts to unify migration policy has been the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), established in the early 2000's which was created as a framework that would guarantee harmonised standards for people seeking protection within European borders. This is "based on an understanding that the EU, an area of open borders and freedom of movement where countries share the same fundamental values, needs to have a common approach to implement transparent, effective and equitable procedures" (EUAA, 2022).

However, in practice, his system presented some shortages. It placed a disproportional burden on countries where the migrants were arriving in higher numbers, failing to instil responsibility sharing. Countries located at the EU's external borders, such as Greece, Italy, and Spain, carried a disproportionate share of responsibility for asylum processing and reception. It was also plagued by slow and uneven procedures, as well as poor reception conditions. Due to this, this system was then complemented in 2024 by the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which seeks to address the long-standing deficiencies of the CEAS by introducing faster border procedures, clearer responsibilities among states, and a mechanism of mandatory solidarity. This includes requirements for states to either relocate asylum seekers or contribute financially when not willing to host them. This pact

would also instil a more robust screening policy, as well as tightening the requirements of what would qualify someone to be an asylum seeker, as to avoid exploitation (European Commission, 2024b).

Furthermore, financial instruments like the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund have been expanded to support national efforts in integration and resettlement. This demonstrates a growing EU commitment to shared responsibility and to supporting member states in the management of migration and integration.

While much of the EU framework focuses on asylum and protection, it also recognizes the importance of regular migration channels. Beyond humanitarian entry, there are several legal pathways designed to facilitate mobility and respond to labour market needs. Instruments such as the EU Blue Card, family reunification schemes, and talent-based visa programmes aim to attract skilled workers and support family stability within migrant communities. These mechanisms illustrate how migration policy in Europe is not solely reactive to crisis but also proactive.

Nevertheless, the implementation of these frameworks remains uneven across member states. While the EU provides a common foundation, national governments retain the final say in shaping how migration and integration are managed in practice. At the national level, significant deviations emerge in both the content and implementation of migration or integration policies. Germany, for instance, has adopted a relatively structured and institutionalized approach, offering language training, civic education, and job market integration to incoming migrants, but they also have high standards when it comes to nationalization. France, in contrast, (and often times controversially) adheres to an ideal that emphasizes cultural assimilation and abstains from recognizing ethnic or religious identities in public policy. Meanwhile, more restrictive models are found in countries such as Hungary, which have introduced caps, deterrence strategies, and increasingly selective criteria for residence and citizenship (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

These national differences highlight how migration policy, even within a shared EU framework, is deeply political and easily yields to private state interests. The refugee crisis of 2015 and the displacement triggered by the war in Ukraine revealed both the strengths and limitations of Europe's response mechanisms. While temporary protection for Ukrainians was swiftly implemented under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive,

other groups have not experienced the same openness, revealing what could be considered a hierarchy in humanitarian and political acceptance.

This mashup of policies and ideals reveals that there is still a long road to be paved when it comes to migration policy. While it is true that the foundations are present, migration control in Europe remains a work in progress. It might be impossible to have a fully universal response that will please all member states, but the current reality is that migration is a tenuous topic at best, which is and will most likely always be subject to strong discourse. Inevitably, Europe will have to make a pivotal decision: whether to embrace migration as a central component of its future or continue to treat it as a temporary concern. Although policy tools and legal mechanisms already exist to forward integration, the differing approaches across member states set back the possibility of a cohesive European-wide framework. As a result, migrants often face unequal experiences, which undermines the sense of integration within the European space as a whole.

1.3.2 The role of business and labour in policy discourse

There are many parameters that should be taken into consideration when migration policy is being discussed. In the European spectrum, the framing usually involves moral, humanitarian and security-related themes. However, there is one other component that is also very prevalent in decision making related to migration, that is not as visible as its counterparts: labour market demands and business interests.

> Most OECD countries expect growing shortages of highly-skilled labour in the coming two decades, and immigration is viewed as one way of addressing these. Most OECD countries have introduced policies aimed at facilitating the recruitment of such workers in recent years and efforts along these lines can be expected to continue. (Chaloff & Lemaître, 2009)

Particularly in the last two decades, economic necessity has more so dictated the tone of migration conversations, with labour shortages in key sectors serving as points in favour for those advocating for migration. This is to say, economic reasons have become an increasingly important point of discussion when reviewing the migration stance.

Spain provides one of the clearest illustrations of this dynamic. In November 2024, Spain announced plans to legalize approximately 300,000 undocumented migrants per year to

fill labour shortages in sectors such as construction, agriculture, tourism, and healthcare (Reuters, 2024). This reform served to simplify administrative procedures by extending work permits, facilitating self-employment, and easing family reunification.

Italy is another instance, where annual quotas within the Decreto Flussi program were made directly to cover labour deficits in key sectors such as caregiving, agriculture, tourism, transportation, and construction. The 2025 decree sets quotas for over 70,000 non-seasonal, 110,000 seasonal, and 10,000 caregiver visas, which is an intentional response to workforce gaps identified by the industry and regional governments (Schulte, 2025). It also embraced more digital, hassle-free routes to permit obtaining procedures, which goes to show that there might be a need to simply processes in order to comply with economic urgency.

Another strong example is Germany's Skilled Workers Immigration Act, which illustrates just this point. Enacted in 2023, this act lowered the threshold for skilled non-EU professionals to come into Germany seeking job opportunities. Measures such as adjusting the Blue Card salary limit and introducing point-based systems that overviews a job-seekers language skills, qualification and professional experience were some of the changes implemented to attempt to bring more skilled workers into the country. This shows that Germany "not only accepts qualified immigration, but also wants it" (Die Bundesregierung, 2024). These policy changes align with long-standing concerns raised by industry groups and employer associations about workforce shortages and competitive pressures, suggesting that economic needs likely influenced the law's design.

The German example is particularly interesting, as there seems to be some major discrepancies between the political discourse around the topic of immigration and the actual steps being taken, demonstrating the paradox at the heart of migrantion politics. The current chancellor, Friedrich Merz, takes away with the same hand that gives. While declaring at a celebratory ceremony that Germany needs migrants to boost progress, his government enforces a new policy to reject asylum seekers at their borders (Wilkes & Reiter, 2025). This duality illustrates a wider European challenge: the simultaneous existence of a strong rejection for immigration alongside pro-business reforms that want to enhance opportunities and create space for more labour-centric migration.

This example illustrates one of the biggest drawbacks of business needs influencing policy, which is an issue that plagues not only Germany, but the whole principle of need-

based immigration as a whole. When immigrants are primarily framed as a solution to economic shortages, their value is reduced to numbers and productivity metrics, rather than active contributing members of a given society. This approach risks fostering a more performative or utilitarian approach to integration, where immigrants are welcomed as long as they meet labour market demands, but remain excluded from social and political participation (as exemplified by the attempts at hindering nationalization of migrants in many European countries such as Germany and Portugal). Germany's Skilled Workers Act, for instance, has received praise for being sympathetic to employer concerns. However, it can be argued that by focusing only on "highly skilled" migrants, it subtly perpetuates a hierarchy of worthiness, making it more difficult for other groups, like low-skilled workers or asylum seekers, to be accepted as valid members of society. In a similar fashion, the quota-based systems in Spain and Italy, while effective in addressing workforce shortages, risk normalizing a rotational and disposable model of migration, where people are brought in to fill immediate gaps but are socially uncertain once those needs eventually shift.

This demonstrates that even well-intentioned migration policies (tailored to business and labour market demands) often fall short when it comes to fostering genuine integration. As an article for Bertelsmann Stiftung, an independent foundation dedicated to producing studies and rankings, points out, newcomers continue to face “persistent socioeconomic gaps between natives and newcomers” and many arrive with “skills and experience out of sync with the needs of local employers” (Papademetriou & Benton, 2016, p. 5). In other words, while these policies may succeed in fulfilling immediate needs, they risk reducing migrants to numbers, overlooking the broader social, cultural, and structural dimensions that support successful long-term integration into host societies.

CHAPTER II – IMMIGRATION AND IT'S ROLE ON THE ECONOMY

2.1 Immigrant contribution to the economy

Having established the theoretical framework, it is important to also focus on the quantitative, day-to-day facts of immigration. In the broader debate on integration, economic contribution is a key pillar that must be studied and reviewed to help not only adequately prepare political measures, but also to be able to combat disparaging narratives that are not based on facts.

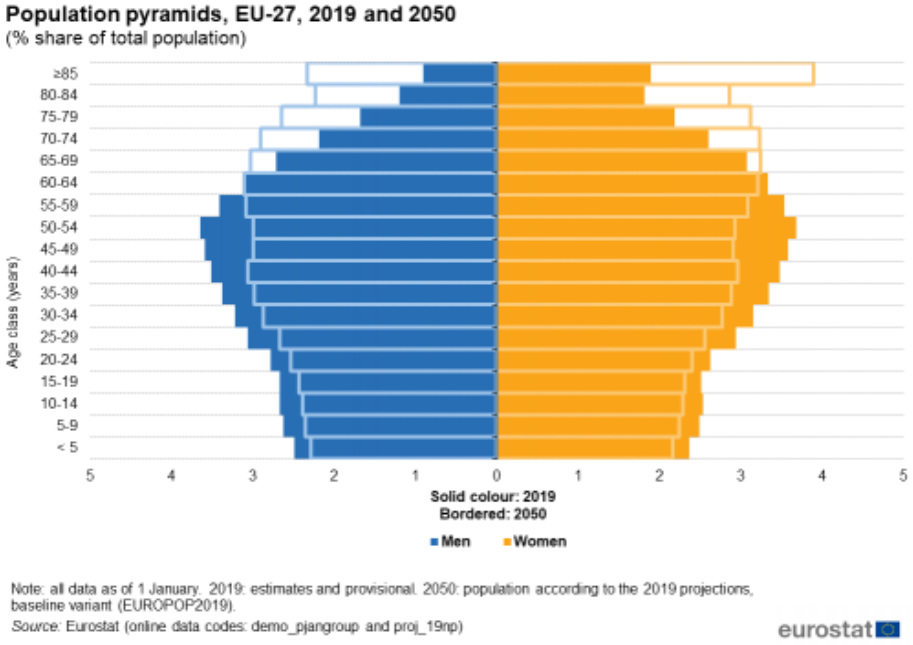
Having an accurate idea on the factual side of migration when it pertains to economic contribution is essential, even more so as recent studies focus on the importance of this population to sustain social security systems.

2.1.1 Labor market participation and economic growth

Looking at the current trends and future predictions, it becomes clear that most populations are ageing at rapid rates, which the birth rate is not accompanying. As exhibited by figure 1, it was found that by 2050, "the number of people in the EU-27 aged 75-84 years is projected to expand by 56.1 %, while the number aged 65-74 years is projected to increase by 16.6 %. By contrast, the latest projections suggest that there will be 13.5 % fewer people aged less than 55" (Eurostat, 2020).

Figure 1

Population Pyramids, EU-27, 2019 and 2050 (% share of total population)



Note. From Eurostat, *Population pyramids, EU-27, 2019 and 2050*, 2019 (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Ageing_Europe_-_statistics_on_population_developments). © Eurostat. Reproduced under the European Union open data license.

This systemic ageing of the population is in direct correlation with the dilapidation of the job market. Adding to this, there is the fact that technology is in constant evolution meaning that there are continuously altering job requirements, which the existing working population might struggle to grasp. This is exacerbated with the aging working population, which is usually somewhat synonymous to a population that is unlikely to learn new technologies and change their approach to their tasks, and a population that would inevitably struggle even when tempted to change. According to European Commission Vice-President for Social Rights, Roxana Mînzatu, the situation is dire: "Four in five businesses struggle to find the workers they need with the right skill set." (ETIAS, 2025). This means that many job openings will remain unfilled due to a lack of workers with the required skills for the part. This overall situation is what is contributing to the increasingly common situation that many countries and areas find themselves in, experiencing labour shortages and surpluses. A shortage happens when there is an insufficient number of skilled workers willing to accept roles in a specific field, while a surplus happens when there is too high a volume of skilled workers in a field that is unable to keep up with job demand (Gauret, 2024).

As Europe struggles with widespread labour shortages and ageing populations, governments are faced with limited options. Among the most common responses are raising the retirement age, increasing investment in education and training, and recruiting migrant workers. While the first two offer partial or long-term solutions, only immigration provides a rapid response to immediate gaps.

Extending working life through delayed retirement may ease pressure temporarily, but it does not address structural mismatches in skills or physical limitations of ageing workers. Similarly, while education and reskilling programs are crucial, they may take years to yield results, which would not help with the current critical situation. In contrast, recruiting foreign workers offers a more immediate solution — one that some governments quietly pursue even while publicly resisting broader immigration policies.

According to a report performed for the European Labour Authority, it was found that the second largest shortage in 2021 was in the nursing field, topped only by plumbers and pipe fitters (McGrath, 2021). According to the National Federation of Italian Nurses (as cited in Serra et al., 2023, p. 2), there are around "63,000 nurses […] missing in Northern and Southern Italy." In an effort to combat this, and despite being governed by far-right administrations, the administration announced that they would be recruiting 10,000

Indian nurses (Vohra, 2024). This could indicate that there could be a political consensus, albeit selective, on the need for migrant labour in certain sectors.

Beyond addressing immediate gaps in the various sectors, migrant labour plays a broader role in sustaining economic growth and revitalising the labour markets. Recent findings indicate that the contribution of foreign workers is not only significant in numerical terms but also influential in counteracting the effects of population ageing on productivity and the GDP.

This is significant, because projections made pre-pandemic suggested that there would be a slowdown in employment, but this did not come to be. As a matter of fact, the EU is now experiencing a historic unemployment low, which can be largely attributed to migration. This was also reflected on the fact that employment growth stayed stable, at approximately 0.8 percent. This underscores migrants' role in revitalising employment and supporting internal demand, as

> Recent immigration into the EU has helped meet unprecedented strong labor demand in Europe during 2022- 23, with close to two-thirds (2.7 million) of EU jobs created between 2019 and 2023 filled by non-EU citizens. This share was the highest seen in recent EU history while the unemployment rate of EU citizens remained at historic lows, suggesting immigrants likely helped alleviate labor shortages to some degree (Caselli et al., 2024, p. 6)

Furthermore, the economic implications are also notable. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that recent immigration trends in the EU could raise potential GDP by approximately 0.5 percentage points by 2030, helping to mitigate the economic drag caused by an ageing native population and declining birth rates. It also stated that there was the possibility of the growth being even stronger if migrants stayed long term, and would decrease again afterwards if they decided to leave (Caselli et al., 2024).

The implications of this are clear: migration should not simply be a reactive measure to a systemic population issue, but a proactive economic strategy. As governments across Europe weigh the political and social challenges of immigration against its economic utility, the fruits of those decisions have already started to flourish. Spain, as an example, has seen an economic growth of 3% in 2024 (in comparison with the 0.8%average of the EU), and this can be attributed largely to migrants and their workforce participation (Wilson & Naishadham, 2025). Their decision to facilitate migration through visas for

highly qualified professionals has proved fruitful, given that migrants account for "64% of new jobs created and half of Spain's economic growth" (Carreño, 2024). And these immigrants are not only filling in for low-skill vacancies, as is usually what everyone assumes is their role. In Spain, the biggest increases in migrant employability actually happened in the hospitality sector, and the technology or science sector (Carreño, 2024), which support the previous point that immigrants are coming into the labour market with knowledge of new tools and ways of working.

Addressing the situation, Spanish Minister of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration Elma Saiz stated in a comment for the Associated Press: "We had two ways to deal with the challenge. That Spain be a closed and poor country or an open and prosperous one." (Wilson & Naishadham, 2025). As Europe continues to navigate an aging population and skills shortages, such examples make a compelling case for embracing immigration as an essential pillar of economic sustainability and national development.

2.1.2 Immigrant Entrepreneurs and SMEs

While we have seen that migrant labour participation currently represents a significant part of their economic contribution and integration, there is another factor to consider under this general theme: entrepreneurship. Immigrant entrepreneurship has emerged as a central component of Europe's economic and social landscape, particularly within the small and medium-sized (SME) sector. All across the EU, migrants are not only employees, but also employers, creating businesses that contribute to local economies, not only via paying taxes, but also due to job creation. Migrant entrepreneurship has often been examined through the framework of ethnic entrepreneurship, which highlights the role of community networks and shared cultural resources in business creation. Immigrant entrepreneurs can rely on co-ethnic networks for labour, financing, and information, allowing them to overcome barriers such as language limitations, restricted access to capital, or unfamiliar institutional environments. These networks create what is often referred to as an ethnic enclave economy, where businesses cluster within migrant communities and support the economic integration of newcomers.

In fact, according to the report by the OECD (2024, p. 122) on the international migrant outlook, "job creation due to migrant entrepreneurship is significant. […] From 2011 to 2021, more than 3.9 million jobs were created through migrant self-employment in the 25 OECD countries with available data. This corresponds to 15% of the total employment

growth in these years". The same report found that in countries such as Portugal and Spain, this entrepreneurial participation exceeds that of native-born individuals, which could indicate a particularly entrepreneurial spirit among migrants.

It is also important to note that immigrant entrepreneurship also represents a pathway to integration. Running business creates a way for migrants to establish visibility in their host communities, while also allowing for relationships to be fostered with local customers and suppliers. This dual role of immigrant-owned SMEs as engines of economic activity and as social points positions them as a key factor in integration beyond wage gaining alone.

Looking at Spain once more for example, where we have established that local and national government has decided to embrace immigration as a prosperity booster, we can see that foreigners are 3 to 4 percentage points more likely to be self-employed when compared to native-borns (OECD, 2024). In fact, in 2021 96,5% of all new registered freelancers/entrepreneurs registered in the country were foreigners (ATA, 2025).

However, amidst the positive, it is important to also note self-employment is seen as a way to combat difficulties in finding salaried employment elsewhere (Yin et al., 2025), which might suggest that entrepreneurship often arises from necessity rather than opportunity. It might not be the first choice, but it could be the more pragmatic one. It also appears as a way to combat the problem of immigrants being overeducated for their job, another systemic adversity that many migrants encounter. As Ulceluse (2020) states, "immigrants generally exhibit a higher incidence of overeducation and self-employment," (p. 5) suggesting that business creation often emerges not from ambition alone, but from necessity. "By starting a business, they can create a job for themselves that matches their level of skills and education." (p. 480) Importantly, she goes on to state that she has found that "self-employment appears to be negatively correlated with […] overeducation" (p. 491). Notably, immigrants who are employed by someone else experience an 11-percentage-point higher likelihood of being overeducated when compared to their self-employed counterparts.

Additionally, being self-employed comes with its own unique set of challenges, particularly for foreign born people.

> Self-employed immigrants born in non-European countries report more often than natives that they experience discrimination from banks, customers, and suppliers,

> and they also to a higher extent consider access to financial capital as an obstacle to successful self-employment (Hammarstedt & Skedinger, 2025, p. 1028).

Lastly, it is important to consider that self-employment is often more volatile and less secure than being a salaried worker for someone else. In addition to facing discrimination and financing barriers, self-employment itself is also accompanied by higher uncertainty and economic risks.

In sum, while immigrant entrepreneurship undeniably contributes to economic growth, job creation, and community strength, it also reflects the structural imbalances that migrants face in the labour market. For many, entrepreneurship emerges less as a matter of free choice or desire, and more as a necessary path to looking for success, when other doors have been closed. Moreover, the challenges of accessing finances, vulnerability to discrimination, and the inherent volatility of self-employment highlight that this method cannot be interpreted as a straight-up substitute for wage labour. This reality also suggests that migrant entrepreneurship, while a powerful contributor to social cohesion and economic/job markets, require supportive policy frameworks to ensure its functionality as a genuine path to prosperity, rather than a last resort to skirt systemic barriers. It would be wise to look into the data of migrant entrepreneurship and understand that they generally tend to be more innovative and that they are actively creating jobs, and cash in on that ability.

Comparative data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor further illustrates the global relevance of entrepreneurial activity as a pathway to economic participation. Reports from the project consistently show that entrepreneurial rates vary significantly across countries depending on institutional support, economic opportunity structures, and cultural attitudes toward risk and innovation. In countries such as China, entrepreneurial activity is historically high and often embedded in strong family and community networks, which can influence the entrepreneurial behaviour of migrants abroad.

At the same time, the concept of migrant-owned businesses showcases another dimension of their contribution: fiscal participation. Whether through corporate taxation, social security payments, or indirect fiscal spillovers generated by job creation, immigrant entrepreneurship feeds directly into national public finances. This angle is essential to understanding the full scope of migrants' economic impact and will be the focus of the next section.

2.1.3 Fiscal contributions and public finances

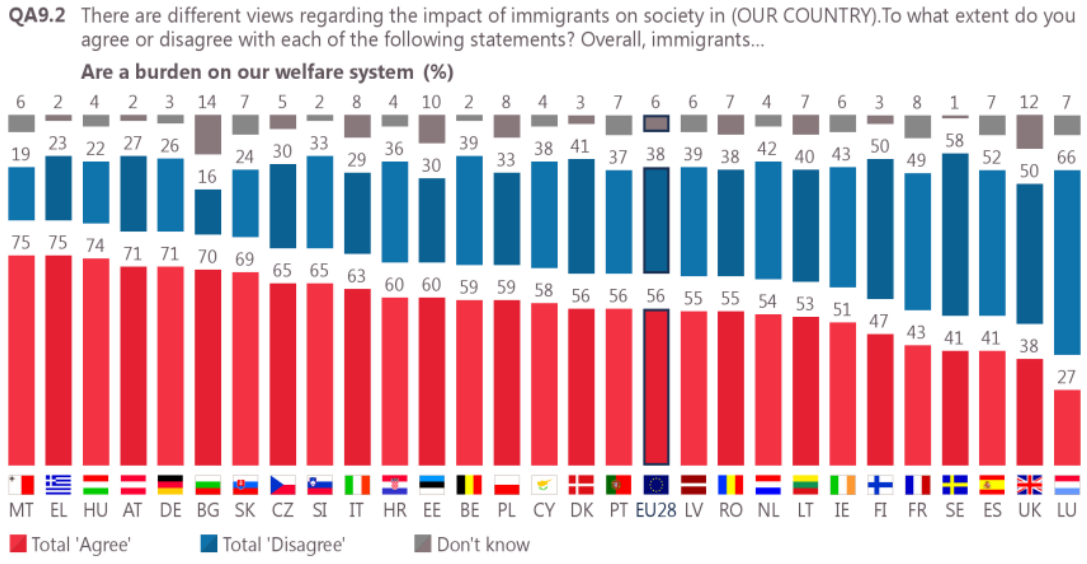
Despite these clear economic contributions, public discourse often frames migrants as an economic burden. Beyond the common claim that migrants "steal" jobs from native-born workers, a frequent argument is that they impose a burden on public finances.

To debunk this, it is important to note that migrants' contributions to host economies extend well beyond labour market participation and entrepreneurship. A central yet often overlooked factor is their role in sustaining public finances through taxes, social contributions, and consumption. Contrary to political narratives that portray migrants as a fiscal burden, empirical research demonstrates that immigrants tend to contribute more in taxes and social security than they receive in benefits (Boffi et al., 2024). This section explores the fiscal impact of migrants in Europe, highlighting both their role as contributors and as welfare state sustainability.

Firstly, it will be necessary to have a look at the social perception of immigrants by native born citizens of the host countries. A survey conducted by the Directorate-General for Communication for the European Commission (2018), where 20.080 interviews were conducted, showed that while 72% of respondents felt to varying degrees that immigrants

Figure 2

Perceptions of Immigrants as a Burden on the Welfare System in EU Countries (% Agree/Disagree)



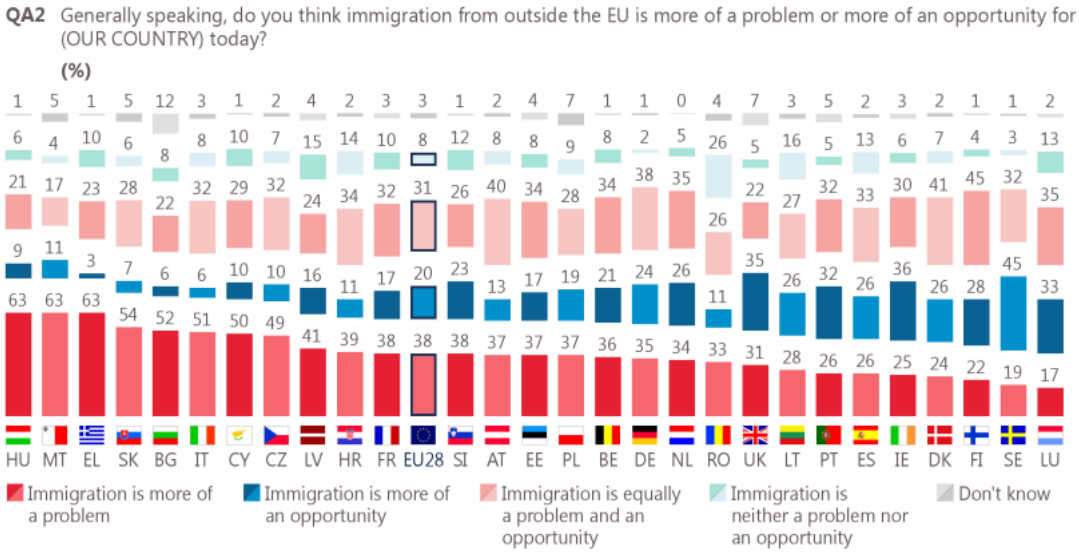
Note. From European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 469: Integration in the EU (2018),* Publications Office of the European Union © European Union, 2018. Reproduced under the EU Open Data License.

helped fill jobs in which it's hard to find workers in, there are still 56% who feel immigrants are a burden on the welfare system (Figure 2).

The following (figure 3) shows that when asked about whether or not immigration was more of a problem or an opportunity, over half see immigration as a problem.

Figure 3

Perceptions of Immigration as a Problem vs Opportunity in EU Countries



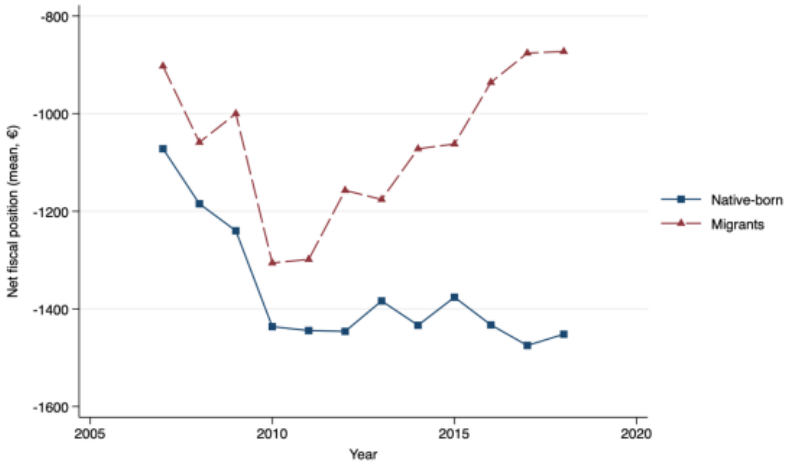
Note. From European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 469: Integration in the EU (2018),* Publications Office of the European Union © European Union, 2018. Reproduced under the EU Open Data License.

These numbers are meaningful, they show that the social perception is, firstly, highly divided. While there are clearly countries where immigration is more widely accepted, even in those countries there are considerable percentages of people who consider the act a problem. Secondly, figure 2 also demonstrates that there is a wide percentage of people who believe that immigrants constitute a welfare problem.

The reality is that the average net fiscal effect of migrants in Europe is close to neutral or slightly positive, but varies by country (Boffi et al., 2024). Figure 4 shows that actually migrants tend to have a more positive net fiscal position when compared to native-borns.

Figure 4

Net Fiscal Position over time by General Migration Background



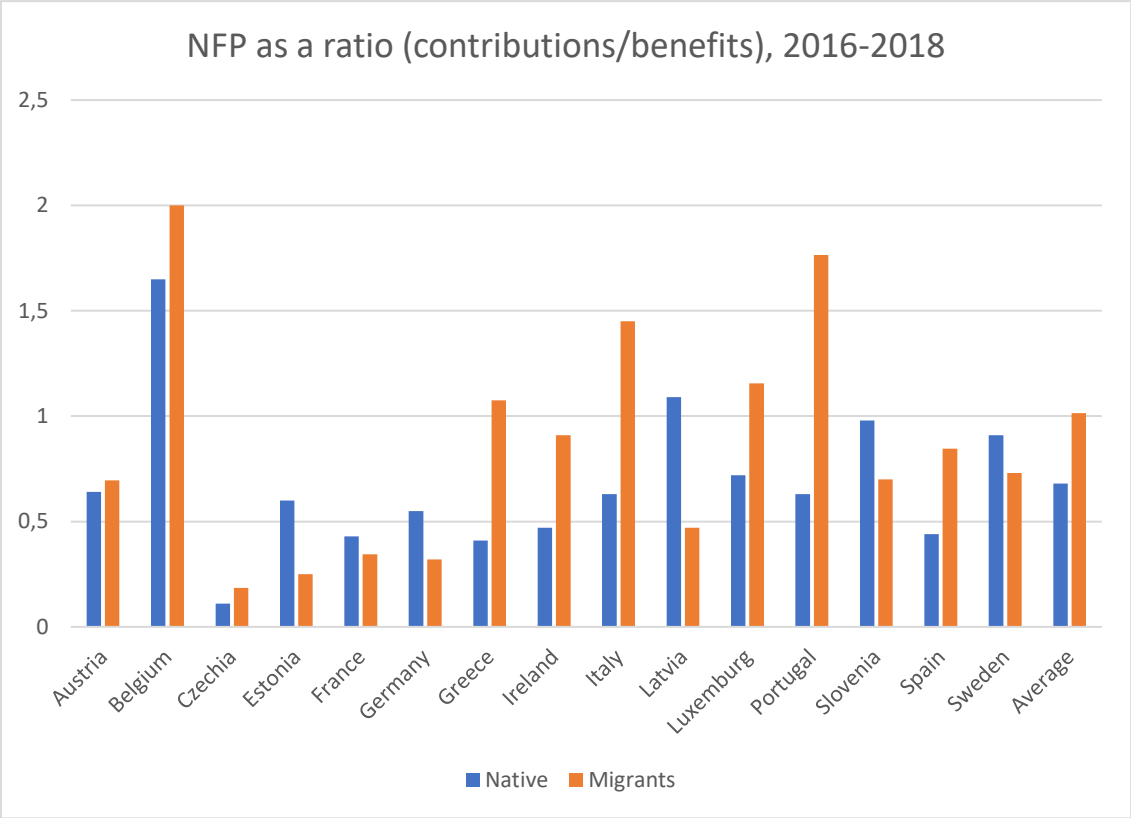
Note. From G. Boffi, E. Suari-Andreu, & O. van Vliet, *The net fiscal position of migrants in Europe: Trends and insights* (p. 19), European Commission, 2024. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/net-fiscal-position-migrants-europe-trends-and-insights_en. © European Union, 2024. Reproduced under the EU Open Data License.

This means that when one subtracts the total monetary value of benefits they receive (their intake from the state) from the total amount of taxes they pay (their contributions), migrants are actually better positioned, which is to say that they, on average, have a more balanced contribution to benefits used ratio.

The comparatively more negative net fiscal position of native-born people, and its continued decline even after migrants pick back up after the recession, can largely be attributed to their increasing reliance on contributory benefits (such as pensions) combined with a relative decline in the total benefits received by migrants. At the same time, migrants' contributions have grown steadily, driven by rising tax payments and social security contributions (Boffi et al., 2024).

Figure 5

Average Net Fiscal Position of Migrants in Selected EU Countries, 2016–2018



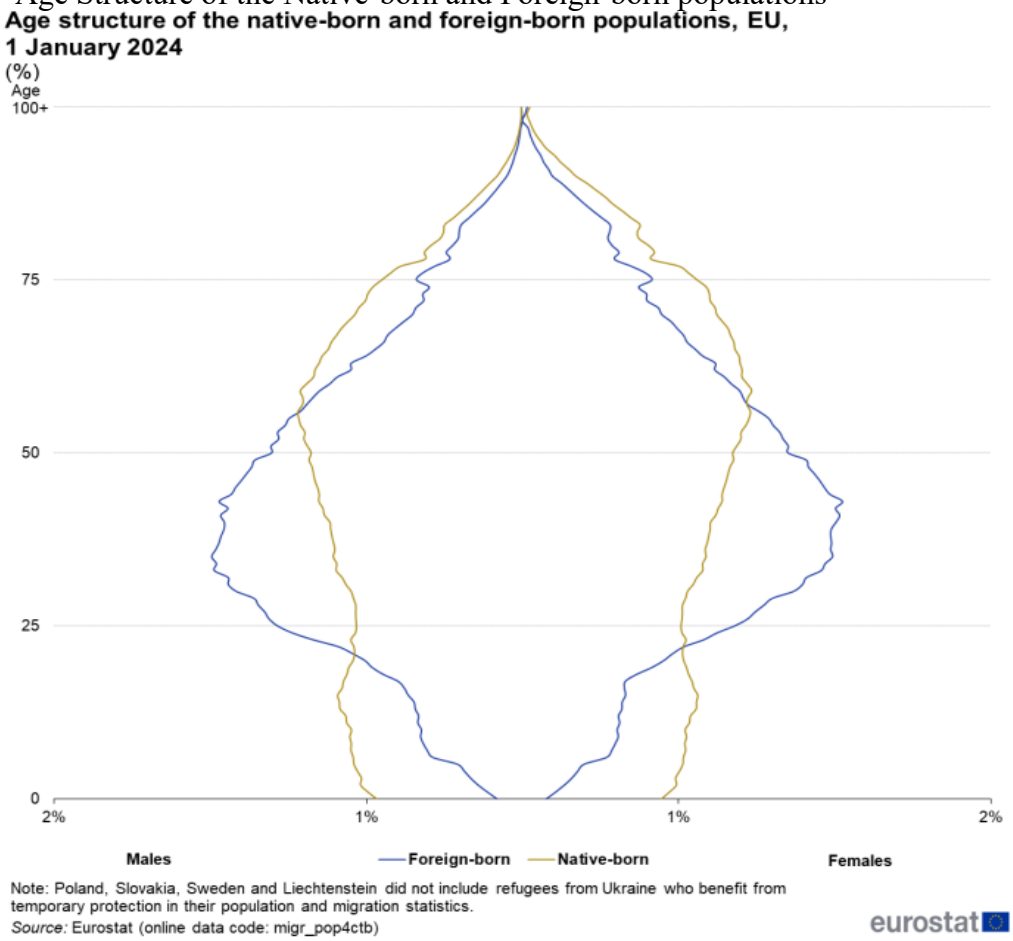
Note. Adapted from Table 9 in G. Boffi, E. Suari-Andreu, & O. van Vliet, *The net fiscal position of migrants in Europe: Trends and insights* (pp. 36-37), European Commission, 2024. https://transeuroworks.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-net-fiscal-position-of-migrants-in-Europe_WP.pdf. © European Union, 2024. Adapted with permission under the EU Open Data License.

Looking at cross-country variation, in 2018 natives paid more in contributions than they received in benefits in only five countries (Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Sweden). Narrowing the focus to the most recent three-year period (2016–2018), the fiscal advantage of migrants becomes even more evident: only in Belgium and Latvia did natives contribute more than they received, compared to five for migrants (Belgium, Greece, Italy, Luxemburg and Portugal) (Boffi et al., 2024). Figure 5 exemplifies this, indicating what the NFP (net fiscal position) as a ratio is by country. To contextualize, the closer to one, the more any given individual has contributed in comparison with the benefits claimed. The opposite is true the closer the value is to zero.

These findings are consistent with broader evidence that migrants, on average, maintain a more positive fiscal position than the native-born population in Europe, debunking the myth that they represent a disproportionate burden on public finances. The recovery of migrants' fiscal contributions noted after 2011 (and continued to a peak in 2017) can be attributed to a combination of factors, including improved labour market opportunities in the aftermath of the economic recovery, country-specific policies designed to foster employment, and shifts in the composition of migrant populations themselves. In contrast, the NFP of natives has failed to recover since the financial crisis, reaching its lowest point in 2017. This stagnation is closely tied to structural challenges: rapid population ageing, difficulties in adapting to evolving labour market conditions, and welfare systems that appear less responsive to these demographic pressures (Boffi et al., 2024). Foreign-born populations skew younger and more working-age than native-born populations in the EU, which automatically improves their short-run fiscal position through higher contributions and lower age-related spending. Figure 6 shows that these immigrant populations are coming in to renew the work force, as they complement the dwindling native-Eu working age population. They also do not constitute major share of people under 18, meaning people who have not yet reached working age, indicating that the majority of migrants is of working age, not part of the groups of people who are by definition dependent on others or state subsidies.

Figure 6

Age Structure of the Native-born and Foreign-born populations



Note. From Eurostat, *EU population diversity by citizenship and country of birth*, 2025 (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=665533). © Eurostat. Reproduced under the European Union open data license.

The old-age dependency ratio is the difference between the old-age population to the working-age population, and it also provides an idea about the possible shift between retirees and workers, and thus "how an ageing population alters the balance between beneficiaries and contributors" (European Commission, 2024a, p. 3). This ratio is very relevant to this discussion, as systemic ageing also means that the EU's old-age dependency ratio is rising sharply. Maintaining the contributor base will require either later retirement, higher productivity, or immigration. On the latter, migrants contribute to public finances by paying taxes and making social security contributions, which help fund pensions, healthcare, and other social security fundamentals. Their participation in the labour market supports GDP growth and eases the fiscal burden associated with an ageing native population.

For this to be possible, it is "essential to [design] policies in areas like education and employment that maximise the benefits of migration, especially by improving migrants' employment situation" (OECD, 2014, p. 1). Without access to suitable employment, recognition of qualifications, language support, and protection against discrimination, the potential fiscal and economic benefits of migration remain unrealized. Well-integrated migrant workers not only fill critical gaps in the labour force but also become contributors to public finances, stabilizing pension systems and supporting long-term economic sustainability.

In sum, the fiscal impact of migration in Europe challenges common misconceptions that immigrants are a net drain on public resources. Evidence across multiple countries consistently shows that migrants contribute more in taxes and social security than they receive in benefits, or have an overall neutral impact. In the long run, the effects seem to be more impactful. It is necessary to invest more into studying the contributions of migrants and how they can mitigate some of the future effects that current low fertility rates and ageing are having in the European landscape.

2.2 Prejudice, Media Narratives, and Social Tensions

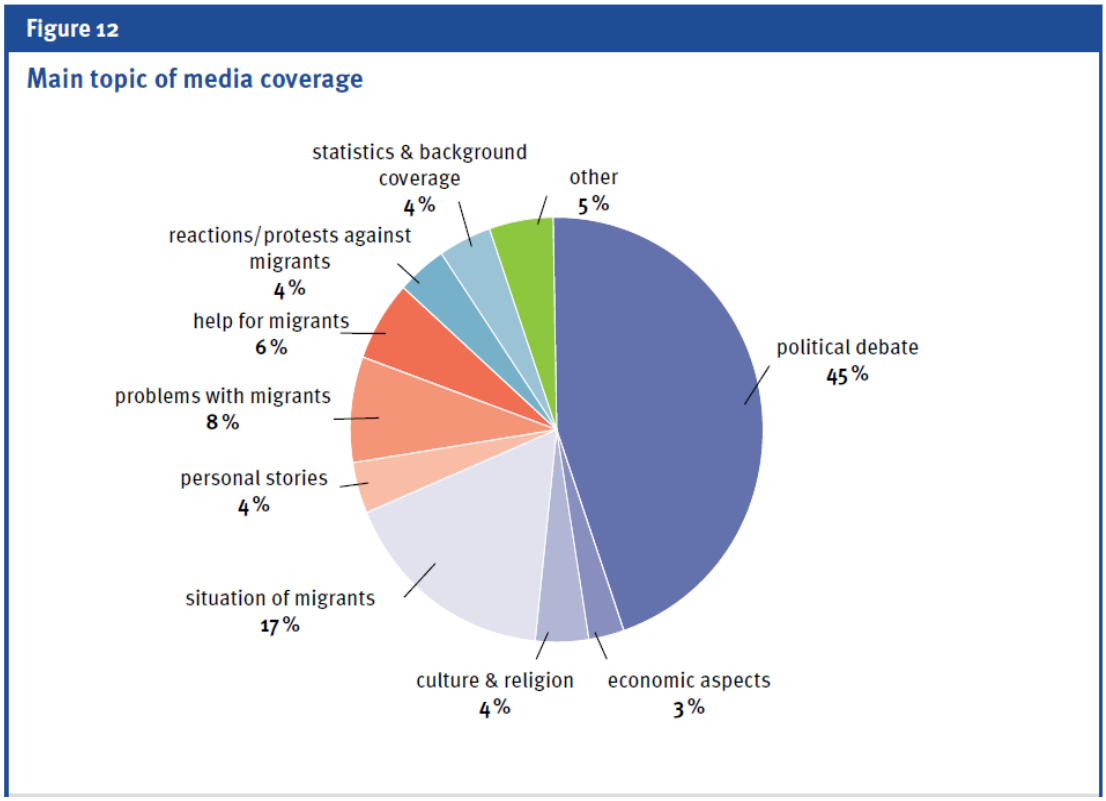
While empirical evidence increasingly suggests that migrants are net contributors to European economies, public opinion often tells a very different story. Misconceptions regarding the fiscal and social "burden" of migration remain widespread across the continent, shaping political discourse and policy responses. While we previously discussed the most common economic misconceptions, there are still a plethora of other ideas and fears that hinder the integration of migrants into host countries. And these ideas must be discussed, as misinformed fears about migration will strongly correlate with negative attitudes toward immigrants and growing support for restrictive migration policies, which is a problem that many European nations now face.

Media representation plays a decisive role in shaping this public perception. A large-scale comparative study by the European Journalism Observatory and Otto Brenner Stiftung (2020), covering 2,417 articles across 17 European nations, revealed that 45% of migration coverage centred on political debates, while only 3 to 4% engaged with migrants' economic or cultural contexts. Remarkably, less than 10% of articles featured migrants as individuals or families (Figure 7). This disproportionate focus on political

reporting tends to carry negative undertones, as it often highlights critical debates about immigration, policy conflicts or security concerns.

Figure 7

Main topics of media coverage regarding immigrants



Note. From S. Fengler & M. Kreutler, *Migration Coverage in Europe's Media: A Comparative Analysis of Coverage in 17 Countries* by, 2020 (p. 33), Otto Brenner Stiftung. https://www.otto-brenner-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_data/stiftung/02_Wissenschaftsportal/03_Publikationen/AP39_Migration_EN.pdf

This skewed representation reinforces stereotypes and fuels tensions, as citizens are more likely to encounter narratives that frame migrants in an unflattering light. It indicates that there is a lack of real experiences being shared with the public at large, which would make people have an overall more detached view of migrants. Considering this, the following section will focus more intently on the social perception of migrants, in an effort to further explore and understand how they are perceived and how that affects them.

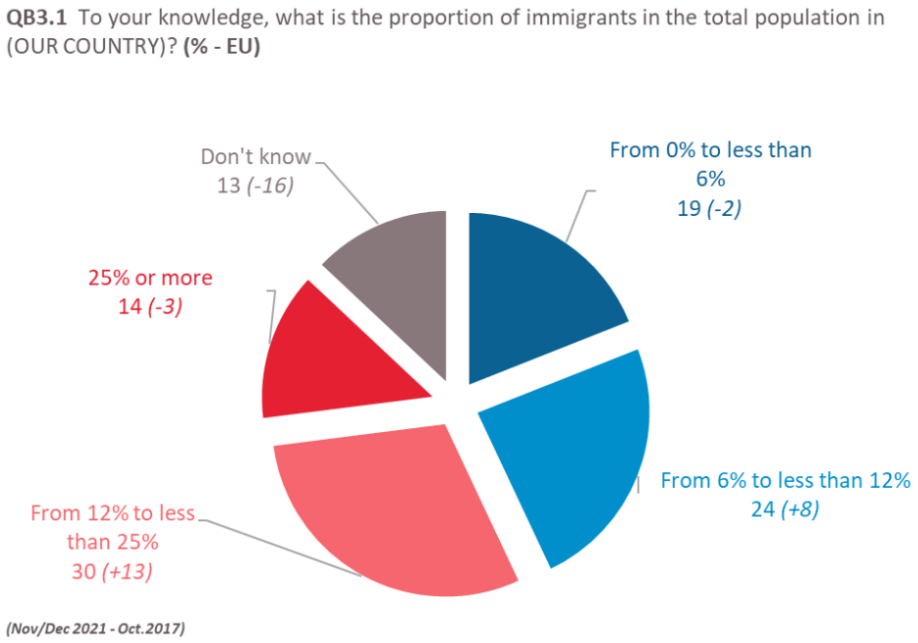
2.2.1 Social Perception of Migrants

In spite of the evidence showing migrants' net fiscal contributions and essential economic roles, across the European Union public attitudes toward migrants are shaped by a mix of misinformation, identity anxieties, and sensationalist media coverage.

The special winter barometer of 2021 reveals that 49% of Europeans state that they are "not very well informed" regarding immigration and integration matters, and 13% claim they are "not at all informed". It also showed that "respondents […] tend to overestimate the proportion of immigrants in their countries in some cases significantly while around three in ten do not know" (European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2022). Around 68%, or seven in 10, overestimated the proportion of immigrants in their own countries (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Perception of Migrant Percentage in EU Countries (Percentage)



Note. From European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 519: Integration of immigrants in the European Union (2022),* Publications Office of the European Union © European Union, 2022. Reproduced under the EU Open Data License.

This disparity is reason for concern, because disinformation is also a tool when creating narratives. Another prevalent misperception centres on welfare consumption: the Reminder project found one in three Europeans believe EU migrants receive more welfare than natives, with almost half saying that about non-EU migrants (Markaki & Blinder, 2019) even though data shows the opposite.

As mentioned, media coverage also plays a crucial role in shaping how migrants are perceived. The power of traditional media, which studies show is still the most frequent way people consume news related to migration (European Commission, Directorate-

General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2022), tends to present migration news when related to major events or crisis. This event-driven presentation frames migration (whether intentionally or not) as less of a structural feature of European societies and more as a perpetual problem to be managed, where there is a constant state of "thing to be handled", rather than a systemic change that now is part of everyday life. This framing fosters a climate where migrants are seen less as neighbours and colleagues and more as outsiders whose presence needs to be managed.

Political actors have been quick to capitalize on these perceptions. Right-wing populist parties in countries such as Italy, Hungary, and France have amplified fears by linking migration with insecurity, cultural loss, or welfare strain. Even in countries with positive economic contributions from migrants, such rhetoric shapes public debate disproportionately. As a result, attitudes toward migration often fluctuate in line with election cycles or specific events, rather than long-term realities.

Beyond media and political rhetoric, everyday discrimination also feeds into and reinforces these negative perceptions, and it has material effects on migrants' well-being. The OECD (2024) report on the state and effects of discrimination in the European Union shows that experiences of discrimination have been rising, with "on average, 21% of people across EU Member States […] experiencing discrimination in the past 12 months in 2023, compared to 15% in 2019". For people of African descent and other visible minorities, this figure is even higher, with 34% reporting feeling discriminated against (Hardy & Schraepen, 2024).

Labor market discrimination is a particularly damaging, but real issue. Several studies have been conducted that show that job applicants with foreign-sounding names are significantly less likely to be invited to interviews, even when qualifications are identical to native-born candidates (Banerjee et al., 2018; Tulshyan, 2014). The rate of disadvantage can go up to 60% when applicants have not only a foreign name, but some or all foreign qualifications (Banerjee et al.). These biases not only affect employment outcomes but also reinforce the stereotype that migrants are dependent rather than contributors, even when structural barriers are to blame.

The effects of this are wide-ranging. Discrimination in hiring means that qualifications often go under-valued, leading to higher rates of overqualification and "brain waste," where skilled workers are trapped in jobs below their level of training. There are also

clear economic consequences when migrants cannot fully use their skills. Both individuals and host societies lose out. Lost productivity, lower tax contributions and higher reliance on welfare benefits represent a structural inefficiency that becomes increasingly costly in the context of an ageing populations.

Similarly, there are also concerns in the housing sector.

> A recent correspondence test from Belgium found that people of North African descent face discrimination when trying to find an apartment to rent, particularly when looking for apartments in higher socio-economic and less ethnically diverse areas – indicating that people from racialised communities can get 'locked into' disadvantaged areas (Hardy & Schraepen, 2024)

These experiences feed a vicious circle: discrimination reinforces exclusion, which in turn validates negative stereotypes in the eyes of the majority population. Migrants' contributions are overshadowed by the barriers they face, the difficulty in overcoming these exacerbated by the fact that the barriers are often invisible to the native-born public. Evidence across Europe suggests that discrimination not only harms those directly affected but also weakens social cohesion and diminishes economic performance.

2.2.2 Xenophobia vs. Labor Need

"In the absence of any coherent plan, the best hope for countries with both labour shortages and political sensitivity to immigration is to practice gross hypocrisy and hope for the best" (Beattie, 2024). By this, Beattie refers to the increasingly common situation governments find themselves in, where they simultaneously commit to limiting immigration for political reasons while relying on those some immigrant workers to fill critical labour gaps. In other words, states may publicly oppose immigration but tolerate or even encourage it in practice, leaving both policy and public expectations inconsistent.

Summarizing, Europe is facing a structural contradiction. On one hand, demographic ageing, declining fertility, and labour shortages make immigration an economic necessity. On the other hand, political rhetoric, media narratives, and xenophobic attitudes have generated public hostility toward migrants. The coexistence of dependency on foreign labour and resistance to it creates a paradox, which shapes contemporary migration debates and has significant implications for their integration.

As mentioned in section 2.1.1, migrants have become so important to national European labour markets, that some governments are going to the extreme of creating deals for mass import of workers for specific areas (such as was the case with the import of nurses in Italy). Other governments are making immigration of skilled migrants easier while at the same time critiquing the amount of immigrants coming into their country, as was the case for Germany and their Skilled Workers Act. These examples demonstrate that migrant labour is not actually supplementary to the existing market, but rather foundational to its functioning. Yet, despite this dependence, migrants often encounter resentment, suspicion, and exclusion in the very societies that rely on their contributions.

Employer discrimination exacerbates this problem even more. Studies of hiring practices across Europe consistently show that migrants and ethnic minorities face significantly lower callback rates despite equal qualifications. Studies have found that "ethnic minorities receive 30-50% fewer positive responses than similar majority candidates when applying for a job"(Fasani, 2024, p. 31). It is also important to note that this discrimination can also be based on structural adversities. With the everchanging policy frameworks, the rules that apply to work permits and visas are also under constant review, meaning that some employers can view the hiring of an immigrant as a riskier option when compared to a citizen of the specified country. It is also not uncommon to see companies paying significant costs to help a foreign employee secure a visa, which can be undesirable. Both of these situations can lead to unconscious biases, where managers will instinctively choose the easiest, safest option, even if not always aware of it.

These dynamics illustrate another structural contradiction, which is that while businesses and economies recognize their need for migrant labour, actual employers often reinforce exclusionary practices. This reduces labour market integration and, ultimately, weakens the possible gains migration could otherwise bring.

As mentioned, the political side magnifies this contradiction. Populist parties across Europe have weaponized public fears, framing migration as a crisis rather than a solution. It is well documented that leaders in countries like France, Germany, and Italy simultaneously voice concern about demographic decline and yet campaign on promises of stricter border controls and reduced immigration (Beattie, 2024). The rhetorical emphasis on cultural threat and security risks increases public anxieties, despite evidence of economic necessity for migrants. In effect, political discourse often works against

economic practicality, with short-term electoral gains prioritized over long-term sustainability.

This political discourse, which becomes increasingly common as the European population and parliament consistently turn more towards the far-right, will inevitably shape how the population feels towards migrants sharing their space. Governments are publicly taking stances towards stricter borders, while secretly striking deals that go directly against their perceived public identity.

This duality is not unique to Europe but particularly acute given the discussed demographic issues it faces. Migration can alleviate this imbalance, but the public hostility makes ambitious policy reforms politically costly, and perhaps completely inaccessible at this point. In casting migrants as threats rather than contributors, governments not only polarize their electorates, but also weaken the legitimacy of EU-wide solidarity mechanisms (like relocation schemes and joint mobility initiatives).

It is impossible to reconcile the current political climate with the economic and labour market situation. Just as much as politics shape people, the people will also shape politics. If far-right narratives are gaining traction, it is because the people have decided so, and a cyclical issue forms, where one feeds the other until the situation becomes truly unsustainable.

In short, xenophobia versus labour need is not an abstract debate but a real contradiction of European societies. Migrants are invited in to keep economies running but treated with suspicion once present. This tension risks undermining not only integration outcomes but also Europe's broader economic resilience. Unless policies and discourses begin to reconcile the reality of labour dependence with the need for social cohesion, the cycle of necessity and rejection will continue to destabilize both the economic and social fabric of Europe. Policies and political figures need to accurately reflect the actual needs of the Union, otherwise there might come a point where migration is truly desperately needed but the general public will not be ready to accept it, in much larger terms than what we see today.

CHAPTER III – ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AS A VEHICLE FOR INTEGRATION

Having examined the broader economic and labor market impacts of immigration, it becomes clear that participation in economic life is not only a matter of financial contribution but also a key mechanism for social integration. This chapter focuses on how economic participation (through both employment and business ownership) functions as a vehicle for integration, highlighting the ways in which immigrants' engagement with the economy shapes their social and cultural presence in the host society.

3.1 Economic participation as a way of belonging

Engaging in the labour market represents a fundamental pathway through which immigrants establish both their presence and identity in host societies. Employment, regardless of skill level, offers more than financial stability: it provides opportunities for daily social interaction, cultural exchange, and recognition within the community. Holding a job facilitates contact with colleagues, clients, and neighbours, gradually integrating migrants in their surrounding social fabric. The International Organization for Migration for the United Nations (2017) goes as far as saying that those who are unable to find work are "more vulnerable to risks of all kinds", meaning that securing a job should be a high priority for those incoming to a new society. They also go on to state that the private sector, as an employer, can do a lot for migrants if it is so inclined. It could serve not only as an employer, "but also as a committed partner in formulating vocational and language training for its workforce" (International Organization for Migration, 2017, p. 5). Additionally, if businesses become more accepting of migrant employment (reducing the prejudiced hiring practices we saw in the previous chapter) they can become hubs for acceptance and integration, helping with shaping the perceptions about migrants.

Employment, when done lawfully, also plays an important rule in "the enforcement of legal obligations regarding the protection of migrants' human and labour rights" (International Organization for Migration, 2017, p. 5).

On a different note, entrepreneurship also serves as an additional pathway to integration, as has been discussed, often emerging as a response to barriers in the formal labour market. Establishing a business not only creates economic opportunities but also enhances visibility and provides a space for cultural expression.

Both employment and entrepreneurship contribute to mutual recognition between migrants and host society members. Even when economic activity begins out of necessity,

over time, it transforms into a source of empowerment and connection, allowing immigrants to establish their presence and identity within the host society.

In this way, labour market participation acts as a central means for integration, translating economic contribution into social recognition, daily interactions and, ultimately, a stronger sense of belonging.

3.1.1 Entrepreneurship and community anchoring

While employment serves as a foundational entry point into the host society, entrepreneurship offers a particularly potent avenue for migrants to establish a visible and enduring presence. Migrant-owned businesses are often (but not always) much more than simple economic ventures; they become community hubs where cultural exchange, social interaction, and mutual recognition flourish. These enterprises, ranging all the way from family-run restaurants to artisanal shops, act as places where migrants and locals engage, fostering understanding and helping to dismantle stereotypes. Even small shops, cafés, or service-oriented businesses serve as kind of contact zones where migrants and local residents meet and communicate, normalizing diversity.

From a sociological perspective, entrepreneurship can also be interpreted through the lens of social capital theory, where it is argued that social capital emerges from networks of relationships that provide individuals with access to resources and opportunities. Migrant entrepreneurship often relies precisely on such networks, as family ties, community connections, and informal support systems help entrepreneurs mobilize labour, knowledge, and financial capital. In this way, economic activity and social integration become mutually reinforcing processes.

Moreover, these businesses often serve as informal support networks, offering employment opportunities to fellow migrants and creating spaces where cultural identities can not only be preserved, but also celebrated.

Notably, the social value of migrant entrepreneurship is frequently overlooked in studies that place a much larger emphasis on economic outcomes. “The literature on migrant entrepreneurship has been so much concerned with its economic achievements as to underplay its social endowments” (Jones et al., 2018, p. 963), not acknowledging that many migrant and refugee entrepreneurs operate with limited resources.

These economic endeavours are, therefore, a show of resilience above all. “The precarious yet frequently skilled participation of migrants in increasingly under-resourced and discriminatory urban contexts” (Hall et al., 2016, p. 1312), and yet, despite these obstacles, these businesses find a way to create a place for themselves in the very fabric of their host nations, serving as community anchors. For example, Chinese-owned grocery stores provide cultural exposure and foster intercultural interaction, while restaurants can serve as a space for informal gatherings, where immigrants can meet and exchange ideas, as well as partake in traditional activities, or showcase their culture to other people.

Importantly, migrant businesses come in many forms and scales, each contributing differently to the community. Small survival-style ventures exist and are prevalent yes, but they are far from being the only ones. Family or lifestyle-oriented businesses, such as restaurants and shops, are also important as they create spaces for intercultural contact and sharing. Additionally, larger, growth-oriented firms also appear, albeit usually in smaller number. Tech startups, export-focused firms, or niche service provider are among the examples one can think of when imagining farther ahead than a regular mom-and-pop shop. These may drive innovation and create connections with transnational networks, influencing local economies more broadly.

Across all types, these enterprises embed migrants within the social and economic fabric of the host society, demonstrating that the value of entrepreneurship lies not only in profit or scale but also in fostering networks, interactions, and belonging.

Beyond the immediate economic and social benefits of employment or business ownership, migrant participation in the labour market fosters networks and mechanisms of solidarity that are crucial to integration. Migrant businesses or workplaces where migrants are fully integrated act as sites where co-ethnic and cross-cultural ties are formed, which work to enable overall sharing of resources, knowledge, and support.

This relational embeddedness is dynamic and multi-layered. Migrants draw on networks from their countries of origin, from established migrant communities in the host country, and from local indigenous populations, leveraging connections in each sphere to access opportunities and resources (Lassalle et al., 2020).

Despite this clear evidence that employment and business ownership contribute to economic stability and social networks, research directly examining how labour market

participation translates into migrants' subjective sense of belonging and integration remains limited. While substantial research has addressed the mechanisms that facilitate migrant integration, such as policies, economic impacts, and social inclusion strategies, most studies focus on immediate or measurable outcomes, such as income, employment rates, language learning levels or access to services. Far fewer investigate how gaining employment shapes migrants' self-reported experiences of social inclusion, identity and overall well-being at first and also overtime. There is also a general gap in analysing the level of happiness and fulfilment that migrants feel before and after acquiring a job or opening a business. There is also no apparent research that correlates this to the original reason for migrating (e.g. if migrants who moved due to economic reasons feel happier or more fulfilled after employment, and how that experience compares to migrants who moved for less self-serving or work-related reasons, like to help a family member).

This gap is significant because labour market participation is not only an economic activity but also a mechanism of integration. Understanding how immigrants are feeling after having a job is also crucial to understand if their employment is fulfilling to them, which could then have cross-comparison between this data and the rate of migrants employed in positions for which they are over-qualified. The lack of overall research indicates that this group is still more viewed as an economic piece, rather than a new faction of the population.

In sum, these ideas suggest that while the how, why, and what of integration are extensively studied, the after, how migrants experience integration on a subjective, long-term level, remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential for developing more comprehensive integration policies that not only facilitate migrants' entry into society but also ensure their sustained inclusion and sense of belonging. Workforce engagement is a critical factor in the integration process, and as such should not remain understudied.

Concluding this chapter, the general idea is that employment appears as a source of stability. Participation in the labour market (whether through salaried employment or entrepreneurship) emerges as a cornerstone of migrant integration, offering not only financial stability but also avenues for social recognition, cultural exchange, and community anchoring. While economic stability and contribution are critical for the integration of any person, not necessarily immigrant, it is not the only factor, and it should also not be treated as the most important one. While it provides useful insight into more data driven, statistical matters, it does not paint a clear picture of the overall experience

of a migrant. Sying that the unemployment rate of immigrants is going down, while positive, does not tell us much in the way of their personal observations regarding their social positioning.

This gap underscores the need for deeper inquiry into how employment translates into belonging, particularly in national contexts where immigrant businesses and workforce participation visibly shape both local economies and everyday intercultural contact. Against this backdrop, the following chapter turns to a concrete case study, examining the Chinese community in Portugal as a way to ground these broader dynamics in lived realities.

CHAPTER IV – CASE STUDY: CHINESE COMMUNITY IN PORTUGAL

Building on the discussion of economic participation as a pathway to integration, this chapter turns to a detailed case study of the Chinese community in Portugal. As one of the country's most established migrant groups, Chinese immigrants provide a compelling example of how entrepreneurship and labor market engagement intersect to facilitate both economic and social integration. This chapter will also detail the methodology used, as well as the insights obtained from the interviews conducted with members of the community, and what their experiences were.

Through this case study, we seek to gain a greater understanding of migrant integration through economic participation, by honing in on one specific community, so that an all-round analysis can be made.

4.1 Methodology

4.1.1 Research Problem, Objectives, and Questions

The present study seeks to investigate the relationship between immigration, economic participation, and social integration in Portugal, with a specific focus on business and labour market participation as a vehicle for integration. Immigrant communities contribute significantly to national economies, yet their social and economic impacts are often underrepresented in public discourse and policymaking. This discrepancy between perception and reality represents one of the central research problems: there is limited understanding of how immigrant entrepreneurship and labour market participation not only supports livelihoods but also facilitates social belonging and integration within host societies.

Public perceptions and political debates often frame immigration as an issue to be resolved, a burden that needs to be controlled and limited. However, as analysed in previous chapters, migrants are actually becoming indispensable to sustaining modern European economies and social security systems. These conflicting narratives highlight the need for research that combines economic analysis with an understanding of social integration, providing a more nuanced and evidence-based perspective.

To address this objective, this study will track the following objectives:

- To explore the ways in which immigrant-owned businesses contribute to the Portuguese economy and to processes of social integration

- To understand if labour market participation is accessible to migrants, and how it helps their overall integration
- To assess the extent to which economic participation functions as a form of social belonging within host communities
- To examine the case of the Chinese community in Portugal as an illustrative example of immigrant entrepreneurship, belonging and integration dynamics.

In line with these objectives, the research is framed around two central research questions:

1. How does economic participation function as a pathway for the integration of Chinese migrants in Portugal?
2. What are the biggest challenges hindering the integration of immigrants, and how do they manifest in practice?

Answering these questions requires a methodological approach capable of capturing both measurable economic contributions and the subjective experiences of migrant entrepreneurs, which is significant both academically and practically. From an academic perspective, this research contributes to filling a gap in the literature that simultaneously considers the economic and social dimensions of immigrant integration. From a more practical standpoint, understanding the role of immigrant businesses and their participation in the labour market can inform policy making, support economic development, and foster inclusive practices that promote social cohesion.

Subsequently, the following section outlines the research approach adopted in this study, including the explanation as to why a mixed-methods approach was chosen.

4.1.2 Research Approach and Study Design

This thesis adopts a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, in an effort to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the theme. This method is particularly suitable for researching complex social phenomenon, as it allows for a combined analysis of both numerical and factual insights, as well as more subjective and narrative inputs from the community. The quantitative data will provide more measurable evidence of economic contribution and general studies on well-being, while the qualitative part will help to capture real lived experiences that will strengthen the arguments to be made.

Primary data will be collected via the qualitative component, which relies primarily on semi-structured interviews with members of the Chinese immigrant community in Portugal. This approach enables in-depth exploration of participants' experiences with entrepreneurship, economic participation, and social integration, providing nuanced insights that cannot be obtained through numerical data alone. While all interview questions have commonalities, they are also adjusted to suit the experiences or occupations of different interviewees., to ensure a varied response pool, as well as enabling a freer approach for the answers. Primary data will be collected in this manner.

The quantitative component draws on secondary data sources, including official statistics, such as reports from the national Institute for Statistics (INE), Pordata, AIMA, and even from international sources, such as the OCDE. This data has allow us to contextualize qualitative findings within broader economic and demographic trends.

The study adopts a case study design, focusing on the Chinese community in Portugal. This approach was selected because it allows for a detailed examination of a particular immigrant community, highlighting the relationship between economic participation, economic impact and social integration. Portugal hosts a significant number of immigrants, and a general approach (either examining all communities collectively or none in particular) would either dilute the specificity of the findings or render the study overly broad. Furthermore, the study employs a cross-sectional approach, capturing current dynamics rather than longitudinal trends, in consideration of the available timeframe.

By integrating a mixed-methods approach with a case study design, the study can better balance what is an extensive theme with the necessary depth. Quantitative data establishes patterns and trends at the community or national level, while qualitative interviews provide rich, contextualized understanding of individual and collective experiences. .

4.1.3 Sample and Sampling

The study focused on the Chinese immigrant community in Portugal, specifically entrepreneurs who own and operate small- and medium-sized businesses and first generation migrants entering the labour market independently. This community was chosen due to the rich history that the Chinese and Portuguese nations share, particularly when it comes to the expansive amount of socioeconomic interactions, as well the extensive migration history between the two.

Chinese migration is also some of the most easily recognizable, especially in its entrepreneurship, given their integration into the commercial and cultural landscape via their easily identifiable shops and restaurants.

A purposive sampling strategy was used, which means that the participants were selected based on specific characteristics rather than by chance, facilitating the collection of in-depth data. Selection criteria included active involvement in business ownership, length of residence in Portugal, and engagement with local economic or community networks. This approach ensured that participants were relevant to the research questions and could provide meaningful perspectives.

The final sample consisted of 5 participants, representing a range of business sectors and locations within Portugal. Participating there were two business owners, one of which also became a worker in the real-estate field, one salaried worker at a multinational company, one researcher at a Portuguese university, and a representative for the Portugal-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCILC).

This sampling strategy, combined with the use of semi-structured interviews, ensured that the collected data were both relevant and provided meaningful insights into the economic and social dimensions of immigrant involvement. The following subsection discusses the advantages of the chosen methodology, as well as ethical considerations and limitations.

4.1.4 Advantages, Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The greatest strength of this methodology lies in its ability to balance quantifiable evidence with the voices of real people. If a purely quantitative stance was taken, it would incur the risk of annihilating real experiences. It has already been discussed that the general population has a tendency to disassociate the person from the migrant, viewing migrants as a collective rather than individual people with their own stories and reasons. Much of the existing literature on migration reduces individuals to numbers, often reinforcing the perception of migrants as an abstract category rather than as people with agency. By combining interviews with statistics and policy data, this study brings the human element back into focus.

The interviews give space for participants to narrate their own stories of resilience and belonging. This personal dimension adds richness that statistics alone cannot capture, while the quantitative data ensure that these stories are not isolated anecdotes but are

situated within broader economic and social trends. In this sense, the mixed-methods approach is the best technical choice.

Participation in interviews was voluntary, and participants gave consent prior to the start of each interview. They were also informed that they could withdraw their consent or not answer any of the question at their discretion. Although all interviewees expressed openness in discussing their experiences, a policy of anonymity was adopted, as a way to protect participants from potential risks, such as unwanted exposure. Instead of using names, the study will identify participants by using relevant, albeit vague, descriptors (for example, gender, occupation, level of establishment in the country). This allows their experienced to be shared, while safeguarding their privacy.

Regarding restrictions, as with any case study, certain limitations apply. The reliance on purposive sampling and a relatively small number of interviews means that findings cannot be generalized to the wider Chinese community in Portugal, nor to other migrant groups. In addition, self-reported data (as is the case with interviews) is inherently subjective. It is important to note that the objective was not to represent the general migrant experience. Instead, it was to zoom into specific experiences and see how they compare to what was previously analysed in theories.

Having outlined the methodological framework, the next step is to situate the case study within its broader historical and demographic context. Understanding the trajectory of Sino-Portuguese relations and the demographic profile of the Chinese community in Portugal is essential for interpreting the data collected. These elements provide the backdrop against which the activities and integration strategies discussed later can be meaningfully analysed.

4.2 Historical and Demographic Overview

4.2.1 Sino-Portuguese relations over time

It is essential to first take a look at the context that frames the relationship between these two nations over the years. Only by understanding their joint history can their present interactions be fully analysed and understood, in context. For convenience, a summarizing table on the timeline can be found at the end of this section.

The relationship between Portugal and China is a complex and long-standing one, with origins in the early sixteenth century. The Portuguese first arrived in Chinese waters

during the heights of European maritime extension, as trade routes between Europe and Asia were being established. Before establishing a formal settlement, Portuguese merchants had already engaged in sporadic trade along China's southern coast, particularly near the Pearl River estuary, where Portuguese ships first landed in 1513 (Hu & Wang, 2022). Around 1557, following a period of negotiations and conflict, the Portuguese obtained permission from the Ming authorities to establish a permanent base in Macau on an official lease (Chan et al., 2025). What had previously been a small coastal village gradually developed into a major base linking Chinese trades with global markets. The settlement quickly became a crucial trading port, linking the Chinese markets with European demand, as well as acting as an intermediary station in the trade that included Japan, India, and other Asian territories. The establishment of the trading port in Macau marked the beginning of over four centuries of continuous Portuguese presence in Chinese territory.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Portuguese position in Macau became increasingly institutionalized. While China maintained formal sovereignty over the territory, successive dynasties allowed Portuguese involvement in local trade regulation and governance. By the mid-nineteenth century, this arrangement had evolved into a clear imbalance between Chinese sovereignty in theory and Portuguese control in practice. Despite repeated attempts from the Qing government to restrict Portuguese influence and presence, Portugal effectively directed Macau's administration and external relations. This situation reflected both the weakening of imperial authority and the rising influence of Western powers in the region (Alcantara de Marrocos, 2024).

A turning point came in the nineteenth century, an era marked by the imposition of the "unequal treaties" on China by various foreign powers. These were a group of treaties imposed to China at a moment of vulnerability, after the First Opium War. During this time, and perhaps because of it, Portugal sought to formalize its position in Macau. The conclusion of these efforts was the Sino-Portuguese Treaty of Peking, signed on the 1st of December 1887, which recognized Portugal's "perpetual occupation and government" of Macau, while affirming that the territory could not be transferred to another power without Chinese consent. From the Portuguese perspective, the treaty provided long-sought legal certainty for their colonial administration. However, from the Chinese perspective, it represented a concession extracted in a moment of weakness. The treaty

marked Macau as a colonial territory fully incorporated into Portugal's overseas empire, aligning it with other possessions in Africa and Asia at the time.

The twentieth century brought new challenges and redefinitions of the bilateral relationship. Macau remained under Portuguese administration throughout the tumultuous years of the Chinese Republic and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. However, Portugal's own history underwent radical change following the 25th of April Revolution, in 1974, which overthrew the dictatorship in the country and initiated a rapid process of decolonization. As part of its new foreign policy, Portugal formally recognized the PRC on 6 January 1975, signalling a commitment to realigning its international relations with the realities of the Cold War and postcolonial order. Diplomatic relations were fully established between the PRC and the Portuguese Republic only a few years later, on February 2nd 1979, when both countries exchanged ambassadors and institutionalized cooperation.

These steps paved the way for negotiations on the future of Macau. The issue gained urgency in the 1980s, as Hong Kong's status was being negotiated between Britain and China. On 26 March 1987, Portugal and the PRC signed the Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration on the Question of Macau, a treaty that set the terms of the territory's return to Chinese sovereignty. Under the principle of "one country, two systems," it was agreed that Macau would become a Special Administrative Region of China on 20 December 1999, retaining a high degree of autonomy, its own legal system, and protections for the rights and freedoms of its inhabitants for fifty years after the handover. The Joint Declaration entered into force in January 1988, and the drafting of the Basic Law of Macau soon followed, laying the constitutional groundwork for the post-handover era.

The handover itself, on December 20th 1999, was a moment of global significance. It marked the end of Portuguese colonial administration in Asia and the conclusion of the longest continuous European presence in China, at 442 years. For China, it symbolized the completion of a historical mission to restore sovereignty over all former colonial enclaves. For Portugal, it represented not a rupture but a transformation of ties with China, as the two countries emphasized continuity through cultural, economic, and diplomatic cooperation. Instead of diminishing their relationship, the handover provided a new foundation for engagement.

In the post-1999 era, Portugal and China rapidly expanded their diplomatic and economic cooperation. In 2005, both governments elevated their ties to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signalling a mutual interest in long-term collaboration across multiple sectors. Portugal also expanded its consular presence in China, opening a Consulate-General in Shanghai, reflecting the growing importance of Chinese markets and investment.

Parallel to these diplomatic shifts, significant measures shaped the migration and integration of Chinese people in Portugal. One particularly important legal legacy arises from Macau's historical connection to Portugal. Under Portuguese nationality laws, certain categories of people born in Macau before the handover, or those with specific ancestral or civil registration ties, retained access to Portuguese nationality. These provisions, while technical and often limited to narrow cohorts, created a pathway for some members of the Macanese and Chinese populations to claim Portuguese citizenship. The rationale for maintaining these mechanisms lay in Portugal's broader decolonization framework, which sought to balance historical responsibility with pragmatic considerations of identity and belonging. For affected individuals, this translated into mobility opportunities within the European Union, as Portuguese nationality automatically confers EU citizenship.

Beginning in the late 1980s and 1990s, several waves of Chinese migration reached Portugal. Migrants from Zhejiang and Wenzhou provinces arrived mainly through family networks or informal migration routes. Many found work in small-scale trade, textiles, and later in restaurant and retail businesses (Matias, 2010, pp. 95–98). While some migrants eventually regularized their status through amnesty programs or family reunification, others remained in irregular situations for years, contributing nonetheless to the growing visibility of the Chinese community in Portuguese cities.

Another transformative measure came in the early 2010s, when Portugal launched its Golden Visa program (Autorização de Residência para Atividade de Investimento) in 2012. This initiative was not created specifically with Chinese nationals in mind; rather, it was a response to Portugal's severe financial crisis and the broader Eurozone debt crisis, aimed at attracting foreign capital into the country's real estate and business sectors. Nevertheless, Chinese investors quickly became the largest group of applicants, accounting for a substantial proportion (50%) of residence permits granted under the scheme in its first years (Gaspar et al., 2024). The high level of Chinese participation

reflected both economic strategies and Portugal's attractiveness as a relatively affordable and secure EU destination. Following this crisis and the gains in foreign investment by the Chinese, "Portugal was found to be the most politically supportive of China within the EU" (Fernandes et al., 2022, p. 50), opting for a more pragmatic and cooperative approach in its bilateral relations and expressing support for initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. "It is [also] worth noting that Portugal is among the EU countries most dependent on China economically" (Fernandes et al., 2022, p. 50).

The Golden Visa thus became an unintended but highly significant factor in shaping the modern Chinese presence in Portugal. However, it is important to note that Golden Visa holders represent only a small segment of the overall Chinese population in Portugal, as it caters mostly to a specific and small sample of the population. Many investors do not reside permanently in the country, especially considering the freedom of movement that these permits allow within the Schengen area. The program nevertheless contributed to deepening Sino-Portuguese economic ties and to domestic debates about real estate speculation, housing affordability, and social equity, leading to subsequent reforms and restrictions in the 2020.

Looking at the historical overview is not merely a record of diplomatic milestones but also a necessary foundation for understanding the dynamics of the Chinese diaspora in Portugal today. The presence of long-settled Macau-linked citizens, newly arrived entrepreneurial migrants, and wealthy investor families are all legacies of different historical moments and policy choices. By situating the community within this duration of Portugal–China relations, it becomes possible to see how economic factors, legal necessity and diplomatic compromises have combined to shape both the opportunities and the challenges that define Chinese migration and integration in Portugal.

Table 1. Portugal-China Relations, 1557-2020s

Date	Event	Significance
1557	Portuguese settle in Macau with Ming approval	Establishes first permanent European settlement in East Asia, foundation of Portugal–China relations.
18th Century	Portuguese consolidate administration in Macau	Macau shifts from trading outpost to colonial territory with growing governance structures.
1st of December 1887	Sino-Portuguese Treaty of Peking	Recognizes Portugal's "perpetual occupation" of Macau, limits transfer without Chinese consent. Part of the unequal treaties.
1949	Founding of the People's Republic of China	Macau remains under Portuguese administration despite China's claims to sovereignty.25th of April
25th of April 1974	Carnation Revolution in Portugal	Spurs decolonization and redefinition of foreign policy, opening door to talks with China.
6th of January 1975	Portugal recognizes the PRC	Marks alignment with postcolonial and Cold War realities
2nd of February 1979	Formal diplomatic relations established	Ambassadors exchanged; Portugal and China institutionalize cooperation.
26th of March 1987	Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration on Macau	Sets terms for Macau's handover under "one country, two systems" in 1999.
January 1988	Joint Declaration enters into force	Begins transitional period; Basic Law of Macau drafted soon after.
20th of December 1999	Macau handover	Portugal ends colonial rule in Asia, Macau becomes Special Administrative Region of China.
2012	Financial crisis Launch of Portugal's Golden Visa Program	Attracts significant Chinese investment, Chinese nationals become top applicants.
2020s	Golden Visa reforms and restrictions	Reflect debates on housing, social equity, and sustainability of migration/investment flows.

4.2.2 Demographic Overview

The Chinese presence in Portugal is a result of the layered policy just discussed, as well as distinct migration waves that marked the long-standing history between the two

nations. Although individual Chinese people and small groups were present in Portugal from the early modern period onwards (most likely due to Macau's role as a trading centre), the emergence of a more settled Chinese community dates mostly from the second half of the twentieth century, accelerating from the 1980s into the early twenty-first century (Gaspar, 2017). This timeline does not exclude the existence of several migratory phases, some of which even experienced overlap.

Firstly, the immigration from the former colonies marked early trends, with Macanese and Sino-Portuguese families linked to colonial administration and trade. Then, there were waves of traders and unskilled migrants, often from Zhejiang, who arrived from the 1970s and 1980s. Many of these early arrivals relied on informal street vending and small-scale commerce to make a living, selling imported goods or low-cost accessories in local markets before gradually establishing themselves in the restaurant and textile sectors.

> These individuals have immigrated at a steady rate, supported by family networks and peer groups that are already established in Portugal and serve as a catalyst for transnational immigration. This immigrant profile is the most socially visible, inasmuch as it largely devotes itself to the small textile and restaurant trades (Gaspar, 2017)

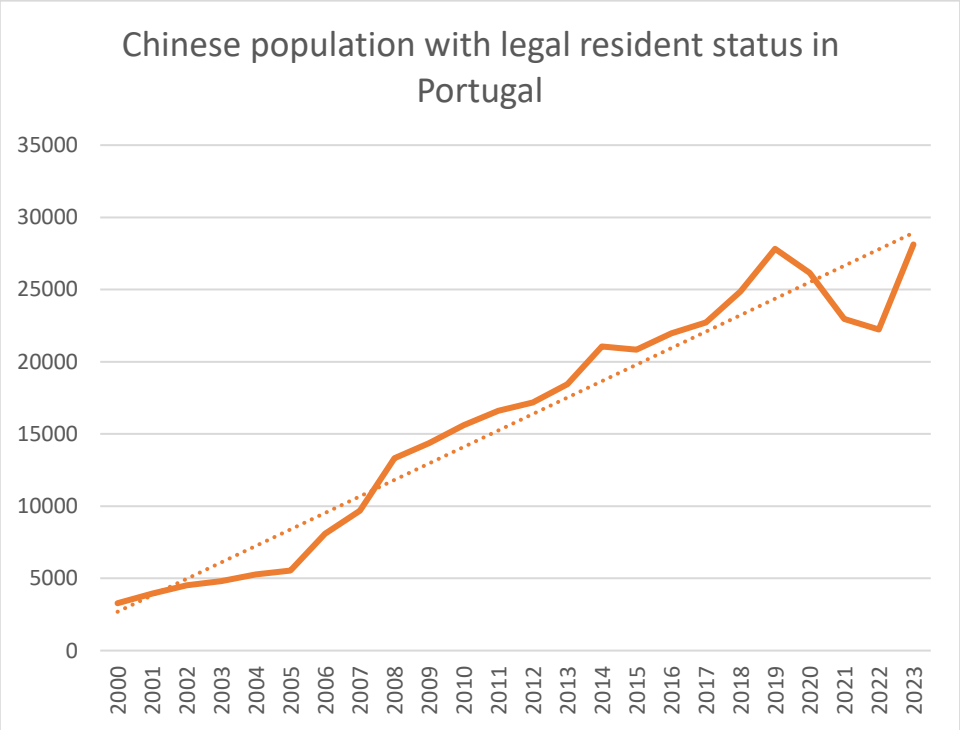
Indeed, testimonies from around 2004 estimated that there were around 15 thousand Chinese people in Portugal, almost double the officially reported number. They were estimated to provide around 20 thousand jobs with their business ventures. A representative from the League for the Chinese in Portugal stated that Chinese migrants always had work upon arrival, and that they would work until they could open their own business (Diário de Notícias, 2004).

More recently, mainly since the 2000s, there has been an increase in students, skilled professionals, transnational entrepreneurs and investor-residents, which can largely be attributed to new legal channels such as investor and residence programmes. 2014 saw a particular increase exactly due to the introduction of these "Golden Visas", which turned the country into a more attractive venture for Chinese businesspeople (Rodrigues & Gaspar, 2021).

Quantifying the community over time is also essential for understanding its social and economic footprint. Official statistical compilations and government summaries show that the number of residents of Chinese nationality (and persons born in China) rose substantially from a very small base at the end of the twentieth century to become a recognisable immigrant group in the early twenty-first century. Data from these agencies indicate that the resident population of Chinese nationality grew through the 2000s and 2010s, reaching figures in the mid-to-high tens of thousands in recent years; for example, time-series tables compiled in 2023 show peaks above 25,000 resident Chinese nationals in the 2010s, with some year-to-year variation reflecting return migration, changing regularisation regimes and statistical revisions.

Figure 9

Chinese population with legal resident status in Portugal



Note. From PORDATA – População estrangeira com estatuto legal de residente por nacionalidade (https://www.pordata.pt/pt/estatisticas/migracoes/populacao-estrangeira/populacao-estrangeira-com-estatuto-legal-de-residente). © Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos. Adapted by the author.

In Figure 9, this is exactly portrayed. From a small base of only a few thousand individuals in 2000, the population with legal resident status grew steadily through the early 2000s, indicating the arrival of traders and small entrepreneurs. The rise after 2005 corresponds with the strengthening of these communities and the arrival of family

members, creating a more stable presence. The graph also reveals the upward trend through the 2010s, peaking close to 30,000 residents around 2019. This coincides with Portugal's post-2008 economic strategies, including the Golden Visa and other investment-driven residence schemes, which attracted new waves migrants. The temporary decline observed between 2020 and 2022 can be associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a worldwide effect on mobility. However, the strong rebound in 2023 highlights that the country continues to be a point of interest for Chinese migrants.

The most recent report from the Agency for integration, migration and asylum (AIMA) found that the Chinese population in Portugal is the ninth most relevant number wise, and the second one who received the most concessions for investment in 2023, followed only by the United States (Lopes & Sousa, 2024).

Age and gender distributions point to a relatively working-age, family-forming profile for many Chinese residents. Available age breakdowns compiled from census and registry sources indicate a predominance of adults in the 25 to 54 age brackets (Neves, 2021), which is consistent with migration motivated by employment or entrepreneurial opportunities, and relatively smaller proportions in the elderly categories. Family reunification and student inflows can also provide an explanation for the high proportion of migrants between the ages of 0 and 24.

Taken together, the historical trajectory of Sino-Portuguese relations and the demographic evolution of Chinese migration to Portugal reveal a community shaped by both long-standing ties and more recent global dynamics. From Macau's colonial legacy to the successive waves of traders, entrepreneurs, students, and investors, the Chinese presence in Portugal has grown from isolated individuals into a numerically significant and socioeconomically diverse community. This combined historical and demographic perspective underlines the importance of situating the Chinese community not as a static entity but as a dynamic actor, continually redefined by the interplay of past connections and contemporary migration policies.

4.3 The Role of Chinese Businesses in Portugal

Chinese businesses in Portugal occupy a distinct position within both the national economy and the broader integration concepts. These businesses not only provide economic livelihoods for migrants but also reshape urban landscapes and consumer practices. Therefore, understanding their role requires understanding the economic

weight as well as their community and integration impact. These two big dimensions combine to create a broader picture of the overall role of Chinese businesses within the Portuguese context.

4.3.1 Economic Impact and cultural integration

Chinese-owned businesses occupy a distinctive place within the Portuguese economy, and the entrepreneurial inclination of Chinese migrants is particularly noteworthy when compared with both native Portuguese and other immigrant groups. Indeed, Chinese migrants make up a significant portion of all entrepreneurs in the country, showing higher levels than all other groups and national born people as well (OECD, 2018).

The 2021 census seems to corroborate this, where the Chinese appear as the largest group (by a considerable margin) who are employers (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2022). In addition, the census also found that over 50% of the Chinese population in Portugal worked as store clerks, reflecting the traditional association of this community with small and medium-sized businesses, such as shops, restaurants, and service establishments. These numbers also underline the centrality of entrepreneurship in the Chinese migratory experience, but they also reflect its capacity to sustain employment, often providing opportunities for both co-ethnics and for Portuguese and other migrant workers.

Considering this, fiscal implications need to be taken into account. In Portugal, even small-scale family businesses are integrated in the taxation system, contributing through corporate taxes, value-added tax (IVA), and the payment of social security contributions for employees. While individually these contributions might appear meagre, the collective impact of hundreds of these businesses can constitute a strong basis for a reliable and steady contribution to public finances.

While the economic footprint of Chinese businesses in Portugal is undeniable, their significance cannot be understood solely in material terms. The traditional and ever-expanding Chinese shops and restaurants have now become part of the normal social fabric of the country. It is common to see these shops, and their existence and acceptance into everyday life also speaks to a broader capability of integration for the community as a whole. Beyond their economic role, these businesses serve as cultural intermediaries, familiarizing Portuguese consumers with Chinese goods, food, and traditions, while simultaneously adapting their services to local tastes and demands, illustrating that commerce is a vehicle not only for livelihood, but also for cultural exchange.

The case of Lisbon's Martim Moniz is particularly illustrative. Once characterized by decline and vacancy, the neighbourhood has been reactivated through the clustering of migrant-run businesses, many of them Chinese, which occupied empty retail spaces and contributed to a new commercial vitality. This area has also become a hub for Chinese people to come and get started, a jump-off point for their own dreams and aspirations, as many start here and then move further into the country to explore business ventures of their own, in an interesting display of community support (Rodrigues, 2013). Many people also choose to start here to establish connections within the business sector, which will serve as their basis when starting a new business venture.

At the same time, these businesses and the increase in jobs they create for members of the community, can imply an overall growth of the cultural community. Since they create deeper understanding and interaction, cultural curiosity also increases, and with an increase in the overall community members, establishments such as Chinese language schools, religious institutions, and cultural organizations can establish themselves, thereby ensuring that commerce is intertwined with identity preservation and intergenerational continuity. Public celebrations of the Lunar New Year, for instance, are frequently organized with the backing of entrepreneurs and business owners, demonstrating how economic activity serves as a foundation for cultural visibility. In this sense, the role of Chinese businesses surpasses individual livelihood strategies, they facilitate solidarity within the community and establish bridges of recognition with the Portuguese society.

This intertwining of business and culture has also shaped perceptions. While "lojas dos chineses" (Chinese shops) remain stereotyped in some media narratives as symbols of cheap goods, their persistence and normalization highlight how economic presence can evolve into cultural belonging.

In this sense, Chinese entrepreneurship in Portugal cannot simply be reduced to economic survival strategies. It plays a structuring role in the urban and social landscape, showing how migrant commerce contributes both materially (through jobs and taxes) as well as symbolically, by becoming part of the everyday life of Portuguese cities. Over time, the visibility and persistence of these businesses consolidate the Chinese presence in Portugal, transforming what began as immigrant niches into established, recognized, and largely normalized components of local economies.

4.4 Challenges Faced and Strategies of Resilience

Now that we have established the trajectory and significance of Chinese businesses to their overall integration, we must look into the structural and social challenges faced by this community when considering their stay in Portugal.

For many first-born arrivals, one of the most immediate obstacles has been the difficulty of navigating Portuguese bureaucracy. The Chinese ambassador in Lisbon has gone as far as to claim that these types of problems are obstacles to Chinese-owned and/or funded businesses (The Portugal News, 2022). Establishing and maintaining small businesses requires compliance with licensing procedures, tax obligations, and inspection regimes that can be opaque even for locals. For migrants with limited Portuguese proficiency, the complexity of these systems has often proved a barrier to full institutional engagement.

These bureaucracies are, of course, not limited to the business scope. With the institutional change from the previous migration controlling organ SEF (Service of Foreigners and Borders) changing into AIMA, backlog has skyrocketed, and there have been protest over the massive wait times that many migrants have to experience to receive a response related to their visas and status. Migrants accuse the institution of leaving a majority of people without answers, who will need to effectively put their lives on hold until a response comes (Forra, 2025). Reports suggest that tens of thousands of applications remain unresolved, with some migrants waiting over a year for a response, effectively preventing them from securing stable employment or planning for the future. AIMA has gone as far as to report delays in over 50.000 investor visas alone (Rattner, 2025).

Economic pressures exacerbate these challenges. The Chinese presence in Portugal has historically concentrated in low-margin sectors such as small retail, catering and convenience stores, were sustainability depends on long hours, family labour and small profit margins. Rising rent prices, all over the country but especially in Lisbon and Porto, place additional strain on shopkeepers, while the growth of large commercial chains and e-commerce platforms intensifies competition and threatens their livelihood.

Alongside bureaucratic and economic challenges, the Chinese also contend with persistent stereotypes. The term “lojas dos chineses” is usually seen as having a bad reputation for cheap, utilitarian retail. While visibility has been created by these businesses, this linguistic term carries undertones of marginality, obscuring the wider

range of Chinese professional and entrepreneurial trajectories. In terms of labour market participation, there are also concerns to be raised. As mentioned, people with foreign names who apply to a job opening are less likely to be given an interview, which in Portugal could also come from the idea that many people hold that Chinese people do not speak the language or are untrustworthy.

However, the endurance of Chinese businesses in Portugal also speaks to distinctive strategies of resilience, rooted above all in family and community networks. Families provide the backbone of many enterprises: shopkeeping is often organized around kinship labour, with relatives working long hours together to sustain profitability. Supply chains, too, frequently remain family-oriented, as goods are imported through relatives already established in wholesale or distribution. This pattern of buying from each other exemplifies how economic solidarity within extended families mitigates external market vulnerabilities.

Beyond the family, wider co-ethnic networks play a vital role. Established entrepreneurs often provide newcomers with initial employment (Gaspar, 2017). This helping spirit enables new arrivals to transition from wage labour into self-employment, gradually replicating the community's entrepreneurial model. Over time, these mechanisms have created a cycle of mutual support, where success is reinvested into the collective advancement of the community.

A further layer of resilience comes from generational change. While first-generation migrants often focus on sustaining family businesses, the younger generation, who are often educated in Portuguese schools and fluent in the language, serves as a bridge between the community and broader society. Many take on translation, institutional mediation, or diversify into professional careers, expanding the scope of Chinese integration beyond small commerce. Community associations and councils also contribute by providing organizational frameworks for cultural promotion and institutional representation, providing a space for sharing and contribution, as well as a safe haven for those who might not know what to do in order to be successful in the country.

Taken together, the Chinese experience in Portugal illustrates the duality of vulnerability and resilience. Bureaucratic hurdles, economic precarity, and stereotypes constrain opportunities, yet these are counterbalanced by dense family and community support

systems that help stability and gradual consolidation within the Portuguese society. The community's ability to mobilize relationships and solidarity as economic resources not only sustains individual livelihoods but also anchors the collective presence of the Chinese community in the country's social and urban landscape.

4.5 Interview Insights

Having analysed the challenges over a theoretical lens, this following section will now draw from qualitative interviews, exceeding the theoretical and entering the practical side of the discussion.

The interviews do not aim to represent the Chinese community in Portugal. Instead, they were added to offer more nuanced insights into the everyday experience of this community. The narratives presented are to complement the theory and literature by providing lived examples of how broader processes unfold in practice.

To capture a range of perspectives, the interviews were conducted with individuals occupying different professional and social positions within the Chinese community, including business owners, salaried employees and representatives of organizations. The questions were open-ended, encouraging participants to reflect on their migration experiences, their integration and perception, and overall experience. Their migration trajectories also vary, with some having moved to Portugal directly in search of economic opportunities, while others first arrived as students and later transitioned into the labour market. Interviews were carried out via email and phone, allowing for the respondents to express themselves freely and in detail. While the number of interviewees was limited, their accounts provide valuable insight on major topics discussed so far, such as language barriers, bureaucratic hurdles, and feelings of belonging.

Out of the five people interviewed, four were Chinese migrants with diverse trajectories. Among them are two business owners with businesses dedicated mostly to serving the Chinese community in Portugal, one is employed at an International company operating in Portugal while another is a researcher. All have lived in Portugal for several years and shared insights shaped by their experiences of integration through work, community participation, and language adaptation. The final interviewee is a representative for the Portugal-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCILC).

All interviews will be analysed based on relevant themes, starting with their perspectives on language and work place integration.

4.5.1 Language and workplace integration

Across the participants, language emerged as one of the most significant challenges in the process of integration. While formal employment and entrepreneurship both provided crucial entry points into Portuguese society, the ability to communicate, especially when the languages are so vastly different, determined how far individuals could participate and feel included in their professional and social environments.

For many, the initial barrier was linguistic. One business owner described the “language barrier” as the main obstacle upon arriving, noting that overcoming it required “time and experience accumulated over the years”. Similarly, another entrepreneur, who attended state-sponsored language classes, expressed frustration with their limited practical value, expressing that “there wasn’t enough time to practice, to talk, or to absorb the content”, as classes prioritized grammar and testing over actual communication. Her experience was also marked by subtle forms of inequality, where despite her higher test scores, she was asked to partake in additional evaluations along her Asian colleagues, unlike her European peers. For her, these moments highlighted the persistence of biases within integration programs.

Such experiences call into question the practical design of existing integration policies, suggesting a need for more conversational, workplace-oriented language programs rather than the exam-driven formats currently in place.

Among salaried professionals, workplace interaction has been overall positive, highlighted as a starting point for integration. One participant noted that some Portuguese colleagues were reluctant to use English as a primary communication language, even when they were capable to, which occasionally reinforced feeling of exclusion. However, she emphasised that daily professional collaboration became her main channel for linguistic and cultural adaptations: “My job has played a fundamental role in my integration in Portugal. Thanks to daily contact with Portuguese colleagues, I have the opportunity to practice the language, build friendships, and better understand the local lifestyle” (Interview 4). Through work, she developed not only language skills but also empathy towards differing or even opposing social attitudes, recognizing that certain

negative opinions of immigrants often stem from broader issues with the country, such as financial and job insecurity.

The researcher interviewed echoed similar thoughts, noting that while language courses were widely available (he himself participated in one offered by a local church), they often fail to produce meaningful linguistic capabilities. He also considered this as a structural issue, arguing that real integration requires everyday participation from all sides, as well as self-motivation, exemplifying by saying that "many Chinese students come here and only talk to the Chinese", which he expressed was not the right away to go about cultural exchange (Interview 5).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight that linguistic integration is not a standalone goal but a continuous process intertwined with professional experience and social engagement. While formal education and existing policy provide frameworks that are a good starting point, the interviews suggest that integration through language occurs most effectively within workplaces and interpersonal relationships, which emerge as spaces where communication acquires real meaning and mutual understanding us gradually built.

Regarding the workplace culture and its impacts, both interviewees hit similar points. Both mentioned that their colleagues were friendly and available to help. The researcher mentioned that they are very lively and easily talk about their personal life and various other topics (such as politics) openly, which initially was a shock, as the "Chinese are [generally] more serious" (Interview 5). The other participant talked extensively about how her colleagues were supportive, making a note of the "typical Portuguese hospitality" (Interview 4), as they were also available to spend time together outside of the professional context. She does express however, that this might also be due to the fact that she is currently employed at a multinational company, where the mindset could tend to be more open. She even mentioned the existence of immigrant-based groups at her job, where she could "share common experiences".

She also feels that these relationships are slowly taking the form of something stronger and more definitive, expressing that her job allowed her to expand her personal network beyond other Chinese migrants and university colleagues, into a more local but still diverse group, highlighting that it also made her "closer to Portuguese society in general" (Interview 4).

This mirrors the previously discussed idea that workforce participation functions as more than a way of sustenance. Studies often emphasize metrics such as employment rates, income levels, rates of overqualification, or the extent to which immigrants fill labour shortages. While these indicators are important for understanding the economic contributions of migrant communities, they provide only a partial picture of integration. Workforce participation is treated primarily as a tool for economic productivity, rather than as a space where social and personal dimensions of integration occur.

Yet, the workplace is also a social environment where immigrants navigate relationships, experience inclusion or exclusion, and develop a sense of belonging or alienation in their new society. Shared workspaces create opportunities for interaction and connection that are different from those in everyday life. These interactions can shape how motivated immigrants feel, how fairly they perceive they are treated, and how integrated they feel beyond their economic role. Questions such as whether immigrants experience discrimination, whether their skills are recognized, and how workplace culture affects their sense of belonging are rarely explored in quantitative studies, despite being critical for understanding integration.

Understanding integration solely through economic metrics risks overlooking these lived experiences. Qualitative approaches that examine immigrants' perceptions, motivations, and social experiences at work are essential complements to quantitative analysis. They can reveal how workforce participation influences integration in ways that statistics alone cannot capture, providing a fuller picture of both the human and economic dimensions of migration.

4.5.2 Entrepreneurship and economic participation

While language and workplace participation were established themes in more conventional forms of integration, entrepreneurship demonstrates a more individualized route, shaped by personal agency.

Entrepreneurship was discussed across all interviews, and was understood to be a key form of economic participation and personal liberty. For majority of participants, starting a business in Portugal was not simply a professional decision, but a response to structural barriers and a means of shaping their own social position within the host country. Even those who are currently salaried workers expressed a strong aspiration towards self-employment.

For one long-established business owner, entrepreneurship was above all a practical solution to limited economic opportunities in regular employment. He considered working for others as restrictive, whereas opening his own business, primarily serving the Chinese community in Portugal, offered both a higher income and sense of control (Interview 2). His company's focus on providing administrative and legal services to other migrants also situates him within a network of mutual support, where economic participation overlaps with community support.

A contrasting yet still complementary perspective was offered by the other entrepreneur, who left China during the strict pandemic lockdowns, seeking what she described as "freedom, independence and dignity" (Interview 3). Indeed, she described that leaving China and its system, and starting her own business in Portugal was her way of achieving this. Her decision to start a legal and immigration services business, alongside her work as a licensed real estate agent with a renowned Portuguese agency, was a decisive step in her integration in Portuguese society. Through this professional activity, she established daily contact with landlords, lawyers, public servants, and teachers, noting that "each client became a bridge between me and the local community". For her, entrepreneurship was not only an avenue for professional realization but also the most effective channel of social integration, allowing access to local networks and institutions that might otherwise remain closed to immigrants. In that sense, her business opened the door for her, in the literal sense, because it was due to her resources and knowledge that she was offered the partner opportunity as a real estate agent, but also in a more metaphorical sense, where she was able to create community ties because of it. This goes to show that owning a business can have profound impact outside of the economic scope, appearing in many aspects of everyday life.

She also explicitly positioned her professional choices as a form of representation, seeking to embody a new image of the Chinese entrepreneur: ethical, modern, and aesthetically aware. In her view, many members of the local Chinese community remain associated with low-cost trade and outdated business practices, which she believes perpetuate negative stereotypes among Portuguese consumers. By contrast, she strives to present a more professional and refined profile, aligning herself and her work with ideals of transparency and quality.

Both of these trajectories illustrate how migrant entrepreneurship can both reinforce ethnic cohesion and while also facilitating intercultural contact, depending on the business model and target clientele.

The interviews point to a balance between staying connected to the Chinese community and reaching out to the wider Portuguese market. Some businesses focus mainly on serving other Chinese migrants, offering familiar products and services and relying on community networks for support. This approach provides stability and a sense of solidarity but can also limit broader contact with Portuguese society. Others, however, have chosen to work more directly with local clients, using their business as a way to interact and build relationships outside their community. While this helps promote exchange and visibility, it can also bring new challenges. These differing paths show that Chinese entrepreneurs in Portugal integrate in different ways, depending on their goals, resources, and sense of belonging.

By contrast, the researcher rejected the idea of starting a business due to personal preferences. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that Portugal has an encouraging environment for entrepreneurship, often advising his Chinese friends to explore local business opportunities, mentioning specifically Chinese shops, restaurants and similar ventures. His stance goes to show how perceptions of opportunity coexist with individuality and lifestyle preferences.

Across these narratives, entrepreneurship appears as both an economic and symbolic tool: a means of overcoming labour market limitations and asserting agency in a new social context. Whether pursued out of necessity or aspiration, business ownership offers migrants a channel for independence and connection, transforming integration from a passive adaptation process into an active act of self-definition.

It is, however, interesting to note, that none of the participants associated their entrepreneurial decisions with an inability to find employment in the country. Rather than a strategy of necessity, entrepreneurship, in the context of these limited interviews, appeared as an outcome of personal ambition and self-realizations, contrasting what was previously theorized. Much of the literature on migrant entrepreneurship often frames self-employment as an exchange to exclusion from the formal labour market. In these cases, business creation represented not an alternative to integration, but a chosen path through which economic participation and personal fulfilment could coexist.

Despite individual ambition, participants also recognized the structural limitations of Portugal's economic landscape. Bureaucracy, administrative inefficiency, and relatively low purchasing power were mentioned as persistent barriers to expansion. Nevertheless, the country was consistently described as an attractive environment in social and lifestyle terms, highlighted as being safe, welcoming, and offering a manageable rhythm of life compared with other countries. As one interviewee noted, the "balanced life" available in Portugal outweighed the professional pressures faced elsewhere, even if long-term growth remained uncertain (Interview 5). This combination of stability and constraint helps explain why some entrepreneurs expressed a strong attachment to Portugal while others saw it as a base for future mobility.

4.5.3 Community Networks and Social Integration

The interviews reveal that social integration among Chinese migrants in Portugal takes multiple forms, and that it is also shaped by the nature of their work and the communities they choose to engage with. Social integration unfolded through a web of relationships that extended across both the Chinese community and Portuguese society. These networks (be they professional, associative or informal) shaped access to opportunities and the sense of belonging in Portugal. For some, community networks provided essential practical support, while for others they represented social boundaries that needed to be overcome in order to integrate more openly into the host society.

For the long-established entrepreneur, the Chinese community remains the centre of his professional and social life. His business (which, as mentioned, focused on administrative and legal services for Chinese residents) depends on word-of-mouth and intra-community connections. As he explained, "Friendship networks and business associations within the Chinese community in Portugal are the most important. It's through them that we obtain most of our clients and partners" (Interview 2). He described his role as a "bridge within the Chinese community in Portugal", a way to connect the various Chinese migrants settled across the country. This illustrates how migrant communities can create their own internal structures of solidarity and support, which could be compensating for the lack of external institutional assistance. Yet, he also acknowledged that integration beyond these circles remains limited, noting that cultural differences still act as a persistent barrier. He particularly explained that integration occurs mostly in the day-to-day organic interactions.

This account shows that opening a business might not always be tied to cultural exchange and integration, it will be very dependent on the client focus group and the type of services provided.

Similar community support dynamics appear in other testimonies. The salaried worker found her first job in Portugal through contacts shared on WeChat (which is a Chinese multi-purpose app that combines messaging and social media). This is a clear example of how digital networks within the Chinese community function as informal labour-market intermediaries. These community channels help migrants navigate a new environment, particularly when linguistic and bureaucratic challenges make formal pathways difficult to access. However, they also reinforce a degree of dependency on ethnic networks and limit the need for broader engagement with local structures.

However, not all participants viewed these community networks as a positive thing. The second entrepreneur expressed strong criticisms of the existing chinse associations in Portugal, describing them as closed and dominated by traditionality: “They are closed, conservative groups, with little solidarity for those outside their circle” (Interview 3). She distanced herself from these organizations, arguing that their focus on low-cost trade and limited innovation “does not correspond the kind of open and collaborative integration [she] seeks”. For her, integration occurred instead through daily professional contact with Portuguese clients and colleagues, stating that “each client became a bridge between me and the local community”, creating connections that existing associations failed to offer.

The salaried worker voiced a similar perspective. Although her first job opportunity was found through WeChat, she deliberately chooses to not engage with the existing Chinese associations for the same reasons: “I feel that many are still dominated by traditional leaderships, with a conservative attitude focused on self-interest” (Interview 4). Instead, her integration occurred through diverse social groups within her workplace, where inclusive and multicultural teams offered both equality and shared experiences. She observed that these environments were often more effective in promoting genuine inclusion, which is a big contrast from her thoughts on community associations that attempt to represent migrants as a whole.

In contrast, the researcher highlighted a more collective and celebratory form of community life. Although his professional activity is not tied to Chinese networks, he participates regularly in events organised by cultural and student associations, especially

during festivals. These gatherings, while rooted in the Chinese community, also bring together participants from multiple backgrounds, fostering cultural visibility and exchange. They represent a softer, more symbolic form of integration, maintaining heritage while encouraging interaction with Portuguese society.

Additionally, although less dependent on Chinese community structures, the researcher described a form of integration shaped by his professional and social networks. Working in academia allowed him to form friendships with people from diverse nationalities. Still, he acknowledged practical barriers in everyday life, admitting that social interactions outside academic circles can be difficult because "not many locals speak English," which limits spontaneous communication. Despite these challenges, he expressed a strong desire to settle permanently in Portugal, describing life in the country as balanced and welcoming, even if full inclusion remains a gradual process.

A recurring theme across the interviews was that formal participation and daily contact do not always translate into full social inclusion. The second business owner, who arrived in Portugal with her daughter, described a gradual yet incomplete process of belonging. Through her work she interacts constantly with Portuguese clients and colleagues, and her daughter, fluent in the language, performs well at school and is frequently invited to birthday parties. Yet, as she explained, "although we are often included, we are rarely invited into people's homes". While her family participates in community life, she still feels regarded as a "visitor rather than a friend" (Interview 3), giving this idea that she might sometimes be on the outside looking in. This sense of partial integration underscores the social distance that can persist even when professional and educational integration appear complete, suggesting that deeper forms of belonging develop more slowly, and often unevenly, for migrants.

The salaried worker expressed a similar vision. Her daily work and friendships with Portuguese colleagues have given her what she calls a "positive and realistic view" of Portuguese society, yet she is aware that subtle boundaries remain. Early on, she struggled to interpret humour and informal communication, uncertain whether jokes carried prejudice. Over time, she came to see these ambiguities as part of adaptation, describing integration as a process of "mutual learning." For both participants, social inclusion extends beyond access to work or education, although they are a very strong start-off point. Integration involves trust, reciprocity, and the gradual wearing down of symbolic barriers that separate "locals" from "outsiders" (Interview 4).

Overall, there accounts reveal that integration in not linear or uniform. It is instead a layered process that unfolds across multiple fabrics of life. Economic and professional participation provide essential entry points into Portuguese society, yet social belonging depends on networks of trust that develop unevenly between and within communities. For some, the Chinese community continues to serve as a key support system, offering security and shared understanding, as well as a good basis from where to start-off and grow; for others, distancing from traditional associations becomes a necessary step toward broader inclusion. Interactions with Portuguese colleagues, clients, and neighbours open spaces of everyday contact, though they fail to completely eliminate the subtle walls that seem to separate locals and immigrants. Overall, integration emerges as a dynamic negotiation that is sustained through daily interaction, and constantly redefined by individual agency within the social structures of both the host country and the migrant community itself.

4.5.4 Policy, Institutions and Bureaucracy

Beyond the social and professional dimensions of integration, migrants' experiences are also deeply influenced by how they interact with state institutions and administrative systems. Across the interviews, participants emphasized that inefficiency and unclear procedures are two of the biggest problems that plague the system, which often undermines the sense of stability and belonging that comes with legal residence and professional activity.

For the first business owner, the administrative inefficiency remains one of the biggest challenges that immigrants must face in Portugal. He described the services of the Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA) as slow and inconsistent, noting that such obstacles weigh heavily on those who are trying to maintain or expand a business. As he explained, "if Portuguese institutions could improve their administrative efficiency, it would greatly help immigrants handle their affairs more easily — which, in turn, would facilitate integration and the success of foreign entrepreneurs" (Interview 1). This is to say that these inefficiencies are not just mere annoyances, they actively hinder migrants and their pursuits in a structural way, as it holds them back from having the same opportunities as their local counterparts.

The other entrepreneur echoed this frustration, offering a more detailed critique of the same issue: "AIMA (formerly SEF) is extremely slow. Renewal, family reunification, or

new applications take months — sometimes years — and come with high costs. Even those with legal residence are treated the same as short-term tourists". She further argued that if the government genuinely wants to attract qualified migrants, "there should be a fast and efficient process to guarantee our residence rights, rather than leaving us in endless waiting". Her words illustrate the direct connection between bureaucratic procedures and the emotional dimensions of integration, and also how inefficiency can wear down a sense of recognition and trust in the host state.

The salaried worker shared a related but more constructive perspective. While she also acknowledged the difficulties posed by bureaucracy, she highlighted the stabilizing role of formal employment, which provides legal security and access to social rights. As she explained, "This job allowed me to secure my legal status in the country — through an employment contract, income, tax payment, and social security". At the same time, however, she called for more targeted support structures, such as youth-focused associations and training seminars for young immigrants seeking to enter the labour market. Her suggestion address the importance of combining bureaucratic efficiency with community-centric methods of inclusion, to ensure that people are supported not only at an institutional level, but also on a personal, more catered one.

From an institutional perspective, the representative of the Luso-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCILC) offered a broader view of how Chinese entrepreneurs and investors experience these same structural challenges, bringing a necessary depth to the already presented narratives. He identified bureaucracy and legislation as persistent barriers to economic integration, describing the complexity and slowness of administrative procedures in Portugal as a major obstacle for foreign investors. According to him, Chinese companies, ranging from small family-owned businesses to global corporations, frequently struggle with navigating the Portuguese legal and regulatory system, especially when compared to faster and more centralized systems that other countries provide. This inefficiency is not only an economic obstacle but also a symbolic one, shaping how investors and professionals perceive the responsiveness of the Portuguese state.

Many immigrants and entrepreneurs encounter lengthy wait times for documentation, not transparent regulatory requirements, and a lack of coordination between state agencies. The representative observed that investors accustomed to faster implementation elsewhere often struggle to adapt to the regular Portuguese response time, where

approvals and renewals may take months or years. To address this, he proposed the creation of a "One-Stop Shop" for Chinese investors, serving as a dedicated and specialized contact point to streamline administrative procedures and reduce inefficiencies.

However, his analysis also went beyond bureaucratic reform, highlighting how structural inefficiency intersects with cultural misunderstanding and perception bias. He noted that, despite their significant contributions, Chinese companies often face scepticism in the public sphere based on "perception infused with geopolitical ideology", which can reinforce social distance and mistrust. Combating this, he argued, requires "transparency, dialogue, responsibility, and concrete data about their positive contribution", emphasizing that administrative reform must go hand in hand with efforts to normalize the presence of Chinese capital and talent in Portuguese society.

The CCILC representative also emphasized the role of structured dialogue between state agencies, business organizations, and the migrant community. He called for regular consultation forums between ministries, the Agency for Foreign Investment and Commerce in Portugal (AICEP), and the Chamber itself to align expectations and address concrete problems faced by Chinese companies operating in Portugal. Beyond bureaucratic issues, he noted that integration also depends on combating misperceptions about Chinese investment, particularly those influenced by global political narratives. He stated that "combating this perception through transparency, dialogue, responsibility, and concrete data on the positive contribution is a continuous and crucial task".

The representative also described the Chamber's role as being a bridge between institutions and communities, organizing training sessions on business culture, legal frameworks, and negotiation practices. These initiatives not only facilitate smoother investment but also promote mutual cultural literacy, which enable Portuguese and Chinese actors to engage on more equal terms. In this sense, institutional mediation becomes a tool of integration itself, building trust through informed collaboration.

Together, these perspectives reveal that integration is not limited to social participation or workplace inclusion. It also depends on the institutional capacity to recognize and effectively manage migrant participation. For many Chinese migrants the speed, clarity, and fairness of administrative processes directly shape their sense of security and

attachment to Portugal. Strengthening these systems, as both individuals and the CCILC suggest, is thus not only a matter of efficiency, but of integration policy.

The previous chapter presented the case study, ending with interview insights from members of the community in Portugal, highlighting how they experience work, entrepreneurship, social networks, and bureaucracy in their daily lives. These accounts show that integration is not a straightforward process, but something that depends on individual motivations and the structure that immigrants interact with.

This chapter brings those experiences into dialogue with theories and policy discussed earlier. It will compare what the expectations for integration are, in theory, with how it unfolds in practice, based on what we have learned. The discussion is organised into three parts: first, a comparison between theoretical expectations and the realities described by participants; second, an analysis of business and employment as paths to integration; and finally, a reflection on how policy and public perception shape these experiences within the Portuguese and broader European context.

5.1 Comparing Theory with Practice

Theories and policies on integration often describe it as a shared process, as something that happens when immigrants take part in economic and social life, and when host societies create the right conditions for that to happen. Employment and entrepreneurship are seen as the main ways to achieve this: working, paying taxes, and contributing visibly to society are assumed to lead naturally to belonging. Within these models, integration is not simply a question of access, but of interaction. Migrants should and are expected to engage with local institutions, norms, and communities, while host societies are encouraged to create enabling environments for such participation.

What emerged from this research, however, is that reality is far more complex. In practice, the evidence shows that integration through economic participation is far from automatic. While all interviewees were economically active, their social inclusion and sense of belonging varied widely. Work or business often provided stability and recognition, but not necessarily connection. Having a job or running a company could make someone visible in the economic sense, while leaving them still feeling socially or culturally outside.

Moreover, the findings also challenge some of the more common assumptions present in both policy and earlier migration literature. Entrepreneurship, for instance, is often portrayed as a necessity born from exclusion in the formal labour market. Yet most participants in this research did not start businesses because they were unable to find

work, they did so to pursue autonomy, ambition, or professional realisation. Participants described it as a way to gain independence, to apply their skills, or simply to pursue something they cared about. Rather than a reaction to exclusion, entrepreneurship often reflected ambition and agency. This suggests that migrant entrepreneurship reflects both structural adaptation and personal aspiration, defying the somewhat linear and one dimensional perspectives analysed so far. It also shows that wide generalizations cannot be made, which is in part what makes this field so interesting, and in part so limited in its research capabilities.

The interviews also showcase that integration is experienced unevenly across different dimensions, it does not unfold at the same pace across all areas of life. Economic integration may advance more quickly than linguistic or institutional integration, while cultural and social inclusion can lag behind. This uneven process shows that integration is not a single step but a long negotiation between opportunities and obstacles, or between what the system allows and what individuals build for themselves.

Altogether, these insights reaffirm that while economic participation remains a vital entry point, it cannot substitute for genuine social inclusion. The Portuguese context, like much of the EU, still tends to conflate employment with integration. Yet as the evidence here shows, belonging cannot be measured through work alone, it requires everyday contact, recognition and institutions that actually work for the needs of those who depend on them.

5.2 The Role of Business in Immigrant Integration: Revisited

The interviews highlight how business activity can be both an economic strategy and a personal pathway to integration. For several participants, entrepreneurship emerged not from necessity but from ambition and the desire for independence. This finding differs from much of the literature, which often portrays migrant entrepreneurship as a response to exclusion from the formal labour market (Yin et al., 2025). Instead, the participants in this study viewed self-employment as a way to take control of their own professional futures, pursue upward mobility, gain a stronger sense of autonomy, looking for better financial opportunities or even obtain a sense of fulfilment.

Simultaneously, the relationship between business and integration proved itself to be complex. Entrepreneurship provided economic stability but did not automatically translate into stronger social connections with the host society. Instead, it sometimes reinforced ethnic-based networks, offering solidarity within the community rather than

cross-cultural interaction. Only in cases where business activity required regular contact with Portuguese clients or institutions did it become a bridge toward wider participation. This duality aligns with earlier observations by Gaspar (2017) and Rodrigues (2013), who note that Chinese entrepreneurship in Portugal combines a strong inward network orientation with gradual integration into local markets.

Entrepreneurship also overlayed with the systematic side of integration. Running a registered business facilitated a sense of participation by ways of paying taxes and being recognized as a legal economic contributor, yet this process is frequently undermined by inefficiencies in public administration, particularly in the functioning of AIMA. The frustration voiced by business owners underscores how institutional barriers can limit even more well-established migrants, highlighting a tension between economic contribution and administrative establishment.

Overall, the findings suggest that business ownership offers migrants a powerful, if partial, form of integration. It secures stability and visibility but does not, on its own, dissolve linguistic, cultural, or institutional divides. The role of business in integration, therefore, does not simply lay in generating income, but in creating opportunities for contact and reciprocity, which are conditions that depend as much on the openness of local systems as on individual initiative.

This reading of entrepreneurship also complements the patterns presented among salaried workers and researchers who participated in the study. Whether through employment or self-employment, economic participation emerged as one of the main structures through which migrants negotiated their place in Portuguese society. Yet while formal employment offered opportunities for daily interaction and linguistic improvement, self-employment provided autonomy and security, despite the higher risks and investments associated with this option. Together, these two pathways illustrate how integration in Portugal often unfolds through work, and not merely as a means of survival, but as a medium through which migrants claim visibility and stability.

5.3 Rethinking Policy and Perception

Across the interviews, one of the most consistent frustrations concerned the inefficiency of Portuguese institutions. Both entrepreneurs described long delays in the processing of residence permits and business-related documentation, as well as the absence of clear communication from AIMA. This indicates that integration is not merely a social issue,

it is also an administrative one. If an immigrant is dependent on a system that often fails to meet their needs, true integration will never be achieved, as their status will hang in uncertainty. As one participant put it, greater efficiency from public institutions "would help immigrants handle their affairs more easily — and, as a result, facilitate both their integration and success as entrepreneurs". These experiences highlight a key finding, that while immigrants are encouraged to contribute economically, the institutional structures to support them frequently become barriers instead.

The representative from the CCILC reinforced this view from an organisational perspective. He described bureaucratic complexity and slow implementation as recurring obstacles for Chinese investors and entrepreneurs in Portugal, contrasting it with the efficiency seen in other countries. As he noted, progresses remains uneven and often unaligned across associations, and the lack of coordinated dialogue between institutions and business associations continues to limit trust and predictability.

Perceptions play an important role too. The representative noted that public attitudes toward Chinese investment are often shaped by geopolitical narratives rather than concrete evidence, occasionally leading to suspicion or political rhetoric that frames Chinese presence as a threat. This "Sinophobic undercurrent," as he described it, reflects a broader European pattern where migration is debated in economic terms but perceived through cultural anxiety. Combating this requires transparency, dialogue, and consistent communication of migrants' positive contributions, both by institutions and by the media.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that integration policy must be understood as a two-way process, where while migrants demonstrate initiative and commitment to Portugal's economy, the effectiveness of their integration depends on the efficiency and responsiveness of the structures that govern them. Economic participation alone cannot fulfil its integrative potential without a political and institutional environment capable of recognising and supporting it.

This dissertation started out with the objective of answering two main questions: in what ways did economic participation foster feelings of integration and belonging for immigrants, and what the main challenges were while reaching for this objective. Drawing on theoretical and policy analysis alongside qualitative interviews with immigrants and key stakeholders, the research offers a detailed understanding of how immigrants navigate economic, institutional, and social challenges in Portugal.

Entrepreneurship emerged, in both the theoretical sense and practical one, as a powerful avenue for integration. Not only are its fiscal contributions key, the role that they take on culturally cannot be undermined. These businesses serve as cultural anchors and hubs for exchange and understanding, especially when they target a varied audience (such as restaurants, grocery stores, merchandising stores). These immigrant-owned businesses act as spaces where professional and personal networks overlap, often becoming small but meaningful points of connection between communities. However, as uncovered during the interviews, it is necessary to take caution when these businesses focus inward into the community. While there is undoubtedly a need for internal networks that help foster the community, this can hinder integration with locals, as the main points of contact never shift from within the community.

Participation in the labour market complements this entrepreneurial dimension. Employment helps immigrants acquire language skills, adapt to local work cultures, build confidence and create meaningful new relationships with people outside their habitual or initial circle. It was also noted that, overall, participating in the labour market changed the perspective of immigrants on the country and its people as well. It was revealed also during the interviews that having to go through the same difficulties that locals do to find employment made them feel closer due to this particular shared experience with native-born people. It also broadened their viewpoint with regards to compassion and understanding, and gave them a new appreciation for the country, mostly due to positive interactions and feeling like they were integrated into their workspaces.

This thesis also draws attention to the measurable economic and fiscal contributions of immigrants. Beyond their role in filling labour shortages, their participation generates employment, sustains public revenues through taxation and social security contributions, and stimulates local economies. These realities stand in contrast to persistent narratives portraying migrants as a financial burden. Research analysed through out the writing of this dissertation found that, on average, migrants have a more positive net fiscal position

than native-borns, challenging these popular perceptions that are often used when debating the topic of migration. It was also important to note the role of the media in their portrayal of immigrant, placing a prevalent focus on political debates and issues surrounding migrants, while giving very little screen time to actual migrants struggles and stories, leading to them being more likely to be perceived as a measurable "other" group, than as individuals with human and social capital.

Additionally, integration outcomes are shaped by broader structural factors. Supportive policies, access to credit, mentorship, and inclusive workplace cultures all emerged as enabling conditions, requested by immigrants and community representatives alike, while bureaucratic obstacles and discrimination remain significant barriers. In the specific Portuguese context, the inefficiency of AIMA (as well as its predecessor, SEF) presents a major pain point for immigrants, entrepreneurs, and investors alike. Long wait times, communication issues, unclear guidelines, these are problems that plague this system and contribute to the feeling on unease and uncertainty for migrants when they think about their future. Additionally, the constant changes and back and forth currently going on regarding immigrant law only add to this. These situations will unfortunately make it harder to attract talent foreign into the country, which might be the end-goal by some of the policies, but will most likely have irreparable consequences on the country's social security and welfare systems.

This is in part due to the aging working population, with retirement ages getting pushed back further and further, as well as changes to job requirements implemented due to evolving technologies. Understanding this underline the importance of coherent public strategies that remove unnecessary constraints and create fair, accessible routes for immigrants to participate in the economy.

The research also reveals the human side of integration. The persistence, creativity, and adaptability that immigrants demonstrate in the face of uncertainty. Interviewees spoke of the importance of community support, informal advice networks, and personal resilience in building new lives. Their stories show that integration is not a straightforward process but a continuous negotiation between opportunity and constraint, shaped as much by individual agency as by policy environments.

While this study provides valuable qualitative insights, it also has its limits. The sample reflects specific sectors and regions, meaning that the findings cannot represent all

immigrant groups in Portugal. Future research could expand on this work through larger-scale and longitudinal studies, or comparative analyses across Southern Europe, to deepen understanding of how different policy contexts influence integration trajectories.

From a policy standpoint, the results point to the need for more targeted support for immigrant entrepreneurs and fairer, more inclusive labour market practices. Measures such as improving access to financing, simplifying administrative procedures, and promoting mentorship schemes could strengthen both social and economic outcomes. Equally, challenging negative public narratives through evidence-based communication can foster greater trust and social cohesion, which in turn promotes integration.

Overall, this thesis shows that immigrant integration in Portugal is a multidimensional, dynamic process rooted in economic activity but extending well beyond it. Entrepreneurship and labour participation serve not only as means of earning a living but as channels through which immigrants connect, contribute, and belong. Their economic engagement generates tangible benefits for society, be it through innovation, employment or fiscal returns, while enriching the social fabric of the communities they join. Integration, therefore, should be understood as a reciprocal process, where both immigrants and the host society stand to gain.

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Appendix I – CCILC Interview

Interviewer: Cármen Marques
Interviewee: Secretary General for the Portugal-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCILC)

Date and format: September 18th, email interview

1. Poderia apresentar o seu cargo dentro da associação?

O meu papel é garantir a operacionalidade diária da Câmara, implementar a estratégia definida pelos corpos sociais, liderar a equipa, e ser o ponto de contacto principal para os nossos associados, stakeholders e media. Actuo como um facilitador e um promotor da relação económica e comercial entre Portugal e a China.

2. Qual é a missão principal da CCILC?

A missão principal da CCILC, tal como definida e operacionalizada pela sua Direção, é fomentar e aprofundar as relações comerciais, económicas e de investimento entre Portugal e a China. Funcionamos como uma plataforma de ligação, fornecendo informação crucial, networking qualificado, e apoio concreto às empresas dos dois lados, mitigando riscos e identificando oportunidades num contexto cultural e empresarial complexo. Para o efeito providenciamos múltiplos serviços que podem ser encontrados com todo o detalhe em www.ccilc.pt

3. Como surgiu a CCILC? Pode descrever brevemente a sua história e evolução?

A CCILC foi fundada em 1978 por um grupo de visão de empresários portugueses e chineses que anteviram o potencial da relação bilateral, numa altura em que a presença chinesa em Portugal era ainda muito incipiente. A sua evolução espelha a própria transformação do investimento chinês em Portugal:

- Fase Inicial (Década de 80/2000): Focada essencialmente no comércio e nas pequenas empresas familiares chinesas.

- Fase de Aceleração (Pós-2010): Com a crise da dívida soberana, assistiu-se a uma vaga de investimento chinês significativo em sectores estratégicos como energia (CTG e CSG/EDP e REN), finanças (Haitong e Fosun/BESI, Banco Comercial Português), e

seguros (Fosun/Fidelidade). A CCILC adaptou-se, atraindo estas grandes corporações como associadas e tornando-se um interlocutor fundamental.

- Fase de Maturação (Presente): Hoje, a CCILC representa um ecossistema diversificado, desde grandes conglomerados a PMEs, startups e investidores individuais, atuando não só na atracão de investimento mas também na promoção de Portugal na China e na facilitação de parcerias mais equilibradas e inovadoras.

4. Quais são os principais tipos de membros que compõem a Câmara?

O nosso leque de associados é muito diversificado, o que é uma das nossas maiores forças:

- Grandes Empresas e Conglomerados Chineses com investimentos em Portugal (ex: Fosun, CTG, State Grid, Huawei, Haitong).

- PMEs e empresas Familiares portuguesas e chinesas (comércio, restauração, import/export).

- Empresas Portuguesas com interesse no mercado chinês ou que sejam fornecedoras de empresas chinesas.

- Serviços profissionais como escritórios de advogados, contabilidade, consultoria, etc.

5. Que atividades ou serviços considera mais relevantes no apoio que prestam aos associados?

- Informação Privilegiada e Aconselhamento: Através de estudos, briefings e apoio personalizado, ajudamos a desmistificar a complexidade regulatória, fiscal e cultural de operar no outro mercado.

- Networking de Alto Nível: Organizamos missões empresariais (em Portugal e na China), business lunches temáticos, e eventos de matchmaking que criam oportunidades de negócio tangíveis.

- Representação Institucional: Somos a voz do sector empresarial luso-chinês junto dos governos e entidades oficiais de ambos os países, defendendo os interesses dos nossos associados e identificando barreiras à cooperação.

- Resolução de Conflitos: Atuamos, quando solicitados, como mediadores informais em eventuais disputas ou mal-entendidos culturais/comerciais, reencaminhando para os associados especializados os casos que o exijam.

Questões Temáticas

1. Como avalia a CCILC o papel das empresas chinesas em Portugal no fortalecimento das relações económicas bilaterais?

As empresas chinesas tornaram-se atores estruturantes na economia portuguesa. Para além do volume de investimento, que foi crucial em sectores estratégicos, trouxeram uma perspetiva de longo prazo, estabilidade acionista em empresas emblemáticas e uma aposta clara na internacionalização e inovação dos seus ativos em Portugal. Este investimento é o cimento das relações bilaterais, criando interdependências positivas e um interesse mútuo no sucesso e na estabilidade económica de Portugal.

2. De que forma os negócios de origem chinesa contribuem não só para a economia portuguesa, mas também para a integração dos empreendedores na sociedade?

A contribuição vai muito além dos impostos e empregos criados (que são substanciais). Nota-se uma evolução geracional e de perfil:

- Geração Fundadora: Muitas vezes focada no negócio e na família, com uma integração mais limitada.

- Novas Gerações e Novos Investidores: São globalizados, formados nas melhores universidades, com uma vontade clara de se integrarem na sociedade civil, nas associações sectoriais, nas administrações de instituições e no mecenato cultural. A CCILC tem sido palco e promotora ativa desta integração, incentivando a participação cívica e a partilha de experiências.

3. Quais têm sido as principais mudanças nas últimas décadas (sectores de atividade, perfis dos investidores, volume de investimento)?

A mudança é profunda e total:

- De: Pequeno comércio, restauração.

- Para: Sectores Estratégicos: Energia (renováveis e rede elétrica), Finanças, Seguros, Saúde, Tecnologia (Huawei), Imobiliário, Energias Renováveis, Armazenamento de Energia.

- Perfil do Investidor: De empresário individual para grandes corporações estatais e privadas com expertise global e capacidade de investimento à escala mundial.

- Estratégia: De investimentos passivos para uma gestão ativa e uma clara aposta na criação de valor e sinergias entre os seus ativos globais, com benefícios para centenas de empresas portuguesas que servem os clusters em desenvolvimento.

4. A CCILC desempenha também um papel de "ponte cultural"? Se sim, pode partilhar exemplos concretos?

Absolutamente. Acreditamos que não há bons negócios sem confiança, e não há confiança sem compreensão cultural. Exemplos:

- Organizamos sessões de formação sobre "Como Fazer Negócios na China" para portugueses e sobre "Cultura Empresarial e Enquadramento Regulatório em Portugal" para chineses.

- Celebração de festivais chineses (Ano Novo Lunar) e portugueses, abertos à comunidade, que são momentos de convívio e partilha.

- Mediação informal em reuniões de negócios, onde nuances de comunicação e timing podem fazer a diferença entre o sucesso e o fracasso de uma negociação.

5. Que desafios identifica na integração e no funcionamento das empresas chinesas em Portugal?

Alguns desafios irão continuar, embora tenham vindo a ser atenuados:

- Burocracia e Legislação: A complexidade e lentidão dos processos administrativos e legais em Portugal é, frequentemente, o maior choque para investidores acostumados a uma implementação mais rápida noutras geografias.

- Barreiras Linguísticas e Culturais: Apesar da melhoria, a língua ainda é uma barreira significativa para uma integração mais profunda.

- Perceção Pública e "Sinofobia": Existe por vezes uma perceção sobre o investimento chinês, alimentada por narrativas geopolíticas globais, impregnadas de ideologia.

Infelizmente, por vezes, propagada por políticos populares que não estão à altura da visibilidade e responsabilidade que tem. Combater esta perceção com transparência, diálogo, responsabilidade e dados concretos sobre a contribuição positiva é um trabalho contínuo e crucial, no qual a CCILC está profundamente empenhada.

6. Que recomendações faria para políticas públicas ou iniciativas privadas?

- Para o Sector Público (Portugal):

1. Criação de uma "Janela Única" (Balcão Único): Um ponto de contacto oficial e especializado em organismos como a AICEP para apoiar o investidor chinês em todas as fases, desburocratizando os processos. O novo Ministro da Modernização do Estado anunciou algo semelhante. Vamos estar atentos.

2. Diálogo Estruturado: Estabelecer fóruns de consulta regulares entre ministérios, AICEP e a CCILC para alinhar expectativas e resolver problemas concretos.

3. Promoção da Língua e Cultura: Apoio a iniciativas que promovam o ensino do português na China e do mandarim em Portugal; e o conhecimento da cultura empresarial chinesa nas universidades e nos clusters empresariais.

- Para o Sector Privado (Empresas Chinesas):

1. Comunicação Proactiva: As empresas chinesas devem comunicar mais e melhor a sua estratégia, os seus investimentos em I&D e a sua contribuição social para Portugal.

2. Integração de Gestores Portugueses: Continuar a política de integrar quadros portugueses de alto nível nos seus conselhos de administração e equipas de gestão, incluindo na China (na realidade em Portugal já o fazem) facilitando a ponte cultural e operacional.

3. Parcerias com PMEs Portuguesas: Explorar mais ativamente parcerias com o tecido empresarial português, que é vibrante e inovador, para codesenvolver produtos e serviços para os mercados português, chinês e terceiros.

Appendix II – Interview: 1st Business Owner

Interviewer: Cármen Marques
Interviewee: 1st Business Owner, owning a business dedicated to helping migrants establish themselves legally

Date and format: October 10th, email interview

1. Pode contar-nos brevemente a sua história e como chegou a Portugal? E porque é que escolheu Portugal?

Cheguei a Portugal em 2005. Naquela altura, a taxa de câmbio entre o euro e o renminbi era cerca de 10, o que significava que ganhar 1.000 euros em Portugal equivalia a aproximadamente 8.000 RMB — dez vezes mais do que o salário médio na China. Por isso, decidi vir para Portugal trabalhar e tentar ganhar mais dinheiro.

2. O que o motivou a iniciar o seu próprio negócio em Portugal?
Trabalhar por conta de outrem em Portugal rendia cerca de 800 euros por mês, mas ao abrir um negócio próprio era possível ganhar mais, ainda que com mais riscos. A motivação principal foi a possibilidade de aumentar os rendimentos através do empreendedorismo.

3. Qual foi o papel da comunidade chinesa na decisão de começar um negócio?
O meu negócio depende fortemente da comunidade chinesa em Portugal. Criámos uma plataforma que presta serviços legais e administrativos, especialmente relacionados com documentos e processos de residência. A comunidade chinesa é o nosso público-alvo principal e continua a ter um papel essencial no funcionamento da empresa.

4. De que forma sente que o seu negócio contribui para a sua integração em Portugal?
Sinceramente, o nosso trabalho está muito centrado na comunidade chinesa, por isso a integração na sociedade portuguesa é limitada. A integração acontece apenas em aspetos do quotidiano, como a alimentação, mas as diferenças culturais continuam a ser uma barreira.

5. O seu negócio proporciona oportunidades de interação com a comunidade portuguesa? Pode dar exemplos?

A principal interação é com o AIMA (Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo), no âmbito dos processos de residência dos nossos clientes. No entanto, como é sabido, o funcionamento do AIMA é bastante ineficiente, o que torna o contacto mais difícil e frustrante, embora inevitável.

6. Consegue partilhar alguma experiência em que se tenha sentido integrado ou, pelo contrário, excluído em Portugal, relacionada com o seu negócio?
Até ao momento não vivi nenhuma situação marcante de integração nem de exclusão. Talvez porque o nosso trabalho se desenvolve quase exclusivamente dentro da comunidade chinesa, o contacto com a sociedade portuguesa é muito reduzido.

7. Que desafios enfrentou na integração económica e social? Como os superou?
Os maiores desafios foram as diferenças culturais e a barreira linguística. A única forma de ultrapassar essas dificuldades foi com o tempo e com a experiência adquirida ao longo dos anos.

8. Quais redes (familiares, amigos, associações, câmaras de comércio) considera mais importantes para o sucesso do seu negócio?
As redes de amizade e as associações empresariais da comunidade chinesa em Portugal são as mais importantes. É através delas que conseguimos a maior parte dos nossos clientes e parceiros.

9. Sente-se parte da comunidade local em Portugal? Em que medida o negócio influenciou isso?
Sinto que o meu papel é ser uma ponte dentro da comunidade chinesa em Portugal — uma plataforma que liga os chineses que vivem em diferentes regiões do país, partilhando informações e promovendo os nossos vários serviços através das redes sociais.

10. Quais são os principais objetivos ou sonhos para o seu negócio e para a sua vida em Portugal? Deseja ficar aqui, ou eventualmente mudar-se para outro sítio?
O meu objetivo é continuar a crescer e a desenvolver o negócio de forma estável. Vivo em Portugal há 20 anos e gosto muito deste país. Não tenho planos de sair; pretendo continuar aqui.

11. Que mudanças ou apoios ajudariam a facilitar a integração e o sucesso de empresários migrantes como você?

Se as instituições portuguesas pudessem melhorar a sua eficiência administrativa, isso ajudaria bastante os imigrantes a tratarem dos seus assuntos com mais facilidade — o que, por consequência, facilitaria também a integração e o sucesso dos empreendedores estrangeiros.

Appendix III – Interview: 2nd Business Owner

Interviewer: Cármen Marques
Interviewee: 2nd Business Owner and worker at a real-estate firm

Date and format: October 9th, email interview

A minha chegada a Portugal foi muito diferente da maioria dos chineses que vieram para cá.

Na China, recebi uma boa educação e, após a universidade, comecei a trabalhar no sistema bancário. Há mais de dez anos, já tinha um salário anual de cerca de 300 mil yuans. No entanto, embora o trabalho no banco fosse estável, era extremamente monótono. Além disso, o sistema financeiro chinês apresentava muitos problemas internos, o que me levou a sentir um crescente desânimo.

Mais tarde, decidi procurar uma carreira mais significativa e prestei concurso público, passando a trabalhar num órgão governamental de alto nível na China, onde permaneci por oito anos. Com o tempo, percebi claramente as mudanças no sistema: concentração de poder, ineficiência e uma cultura de obediência hierárquica. O sistema não valorizava a competência individual, mas sim a lealdade política e o comportamento "correto". Fiquei cansada desse ambiente e não queria passar a vida presa a uma estrutura burocrática como essa.

Além disso, a má qualidade do ar no norte da China afetava gravemente a minha saúde, pois sofria de rinite crónica. Isso despertou em mim o desejo de mudar de ambiente. Assim, deixei o setor público e entrei na Alibaba, mudando-me para o sul, em Guangdong. Para muitos chineses, essa foi uma decisão incompreensível, pois na mentalidade tradicional trabalhar para o governo — mesmo num cargo modesto — é mais prestigiado do que trabalhar numa empresa privada. Contudo, os anos na Alibaba abriram a minha visão: compreendi a lógica dos negócios modernos, a economia digital e a forma como funcionam as grandes empresas internacionais.

Depois, com o surgimento da variante Ómicron, o governo chinês impôs confinamentos extremamente rígidos durante três anos. Vi a sociedade mergulhar no medo e no caos. A liberdade individual foi praticamente eliminada, e as empresas privadas — especialmente

a Alibaba — foram alvo de repressão política. Nesse contexto, comecei a pensar seriamente em deixar a China. Para além da situação política e económica, também me preocupava com a educação da minha filha. Queria que ela crescesse num ambiente livre, racional e com Estado de direito.

Considerei os Estados Unidos, a Austrália e a Nova Zelândia, mas os processos de imigração nesses países eram demorados. Em comparação, a Europa oferecia um caminho mais acessível, e acabei por escolher Portugal — um país ensolarado, tranquilo e acolhedor.

1 Empreendedorismo e desenvolvimento profissional

Depois de chegar a Portugal, nunca quis levar uma vida passiva de imigrante. Desejava continuar a realizar-me profissionalmente e decidi empreender. Atualmente, dirijo uma empresa que presta serviços jurídicos e de imigração a cidadãos chineses, ajudando com vistos, autorizações de residência, estudos e compra de imóveis.

Além disso, sou agente imobiliária credenciada de [empresa imobiliária] em Portugal. Foram eles que me convidaram, por reconhecerem o meu potencial de rede e recursos na China, capazes de atrair clientes de qualidade.

Esse trabalho permitiu-me integrar-me gradualmente na sociedade portuguesa. Ao ajudar os meus clientes com o arrendamento, a compra de imóveis, a inscrição escolar e a recolha de dados biométricos, conheci muitos portugueses — senhorios, advogados, funcionários públicos e professores. Cada cliente tornou-se uma ponte de ligação entre mim e a comunidade local.

Por outro lado, tenho pouco contacto com a comunidade chinesa local. A maioria dos chineses aqui é oriunda de Zhejiang e dedica-se ao comércio de produtos baratos e de baixa qualidade, muitos deles obsoletos mesmo na China.

Acredito que esses produtos prejudicam a imagem urbana e o gosto estético dos portugueses. A China moderna produz artigos de excelente design e qualidade, mas infelizmente esses comerciantes não os promovem.

Desejo representar uma nova imagem do imigrante chinês: profissional, racional, legalista e com sentido estético.

2 A integração social

Durante o meu processo de integração, também vivi experiências desagradáveis.

Certa vez, arrendei um apartamento perto da Universidade do Porto, pagando 1.450 euros por mês, onde morava apenas com a minha filha. Mantivemos o apartamento sempre limpo e bem cuidado. Contudo, ao entregar o imóvel, o senhorio exigiu 1.500 euros para repintar todo o apartamento, alegando que havia uma pequena marca de autocolante na parede — menor que uma unha. Fiquei chocada.

Na China, eu vivia numa casa grande com piscina e nunca passei por uma situação semelhante. Tive então a sensação de que alguns portugueses olham para nós, imigrantes, com uma certa arrogância e preconceito — imaginam-nos como pessoas economicamente frágeis, sem perceber que muitos de nós viemos de contextos bastante privilegiados. Embora, no fim, tenha conseguido resolver o problema sem pagar a quantia absurda, o episódio fez-me refletir sobre a ideia de igualdade na sociedade portuguesa.

No geral, contudo, a minha integração económica e social foi positiva. Sou uma pessoa comunicativa, otimista e disponível para ajudar.

A minha filha é bem aceite na escola, participa em festas de aniversário e muitas vezes convido os colegas dela a provar comida chinesa em nossa casa.

Mesmo assim, nunca fomos convidados para visitar as casas deles. Essa cordialidade à distância mostra que, para muitos portugueses, ainda somos “visitantes”, não verdadeiros amigos.

Acredito que a língua é o maior obstáculo. Muitos portugueses têm um nível limitado de inglês e preferem comunicar em português. Sem um domínio quase nativo da língua, é difícil entrar plenamente nos seus círculos sociais.

Apesar dessas dificuldades, continuo a valorizar profundamente a escolha que fiz.

Deixar o sistema, sair da China e empreender em Portugal foi a minha forma de redefinir liberdade, independência e dignidade.

3 Reflexões sobre as políticas de integração

Com o tempo, percebi que o governo português ainda tem limitações no que diz respeito à integração de imigrantes. Embora promova vários programas e cursos, na prática, os resultados deixam muito a desejar.

Participei num curso gratuito de português oferecido pelo governo.

A estrutura do curso era bastante inadequada: não havia tempo suficiente para praticar, conversar ou absorver o conteúdo. A maior parte das aulas era dedicada a testes e avaliações. Parecia um programa feito apenas para cumprir metas administrativas — se os alunos obtivessem boas notas, os professores podiam declarar missão cumprida ao Estado.

Na realidade, poucos de nós aprendemos realmente a comunicar em português.

O que mais me dececionou foi sentir uma discriminação subtil. No início, a professora era simpática com todos, mas, na fase final, tratou-nos de forma diferente. As minhas notas nos testes eram sempre superiores a 70 pontos, enquanto um colega britânico obtinha apenas cerca de 40. No entanto, ele recebeu facilmente o certificado A2, e eu, juntamente com outros três alunos asiáticos, tivemos de fazer entrevistas individuais antes de sermos aprovados. Foi a primeira vez que senti claramente o peso do preconceito.

Se o governo português quer realmente promover a integração, deveria oferecer cursos com diferentes níveis e perfis de alunos, em vez de colocar todos no mesmo grupo. Caso contrário, para estudantes com maior capacidade e motivação, o curso torna-se apenas uma perda de tempo e uma formalidade inútil.

4 A relação com a comunidade chinesa

Na minha trajetória profissional em Portugal, quase não recebi apoio da comunidade chinesa local.

As associações e câmaras de comércio chinesas aqui são, em grande parte, dominadas por empresários de Zhejiang. São grupos fechados, conservadores e pouco solidários com quem não pertence ao seu círculo.

As suas práticas comerciais e valores são muito diferentes dos meus; muitos trabalham com produtos de baixo custo e pouca qualidade, sem preocupação com ética ou inovação. Por isso, decidi manter distância.

5 A burocracia e o futuro

Continuo a acreditar que Portugal precisa melhorar significativamente a eficiência do seu sistema de imigração.

O AIMA (antigo SEF) é extremamente lento. Processos de renovação, reagrupamento familiar ou novos pedidos exigem meses — às vezes anos — e custos elevados. Mesmo quem tem residência legal é tratado da mesma forma que turistas de curta duração. Essa demora institucional mina a confiança dos imigrantes e cria frustração.

Se o governo português quer realmente atrair imigrantes qualificados, deve oferecer um serviço mais ágil e respeitoso. Uma vez que fomos aceites, deveria haver um processo rápido e eficiente para garantir os nossos direitos de residência, em vez de nos deixar numa espera interminável.

Apesar dessas críticas, continuo a apreciar a luz, a liberdade e o ritmo de vida de Portugal.

O meu objetivo é criar aqui uma plataforma de intercâmbio jurídico e cultural de alto nível, onde pessoas de diferentes origens possam debater temas, assistir a filmes, participar em clubes de leitura e partilhar experiências.

Na China, organizei um clube de leitura, e foi uma das experiências mais enriquecedoras da minha vida.

Gostaria de recriar algo semelhante aqui, num ambiente mais aberto e plural.

A curto prazo, pretendo continuar a viver e trabalhar em Portugal; a longo prazo, se os Estados Unidos voltarem a um contexto político mais liberal e inclusivo, talvez considere mudar-me para lá.

Em suma, valorizo a liberdade e o Estado de direito, e desejo realizar-me plenamente num novo país. Mas também compreendo que a integração não acontece de forma automática: exige esforço de ambos os lados — dos imigrantes e do próprio Estado.

Appendix IV – Interview: Salaried Worker

Interviewer: Cármen Marques
Interviewee: Salaried worker at a multinational company

Date and format: October 19th, email interview

1. História pessoal e chegada a Portugal

Nasci e cresci em Zhuhai, na província de Guangdong, na China, cidade vizinha de Macau. Desde cedo, devido à proximidade geográfica e histórica, a minha cidade e a universidade em que estudei foram bastante influenciadas pela cultura de Macau e de Portugal. Já naquela altura aprender português e vir estudar para Portugal era uma tendência bastante comum entre os jovens.

No meu segundo ano de licenciatura, tive a oportunidade de vir para Portugal como estudante de intercâmbio durante um semestre. A experiência foi marcante e fez-me apreciar profundamente o ambiente humano e natural do país. Assim, após concluir a licenciatura, decidi regressar a Portugal para prosseguir os meus estudos de mestrado. Depois de terminar o mestrado, procurei oportunidades de trabalho em Portugal e atualmente encontro-me a residir e trabalhar aqui. Tenho o desejo de, no futuro, adquirir a cidadania portuguesa, pois sinto-me muito ligada a este país e gostaria de ter a possibilidade de aqui viver a longo prazo, usufruindo plenamente dos direitos e deveres de cidadã.

2. Primeiro emprego em Portugal

O meu primeiro emprego surgiu de forma algo inesperada, ainda durante o período em que frequentava o mestrado. Tinha consciência de que, para muitos estudantes chineses em Portugal, encontrar trabalho após a conclusão dos estudos não era tarefa fácil, sobretudo devido às barreiras linguísticas. Por isso, quando recebi uma oferta de trabalho, percebi imediatamente que se tratava de uma oportunidade rara e decisiva para o meu futuro.

Esse emprego permitiu-me assegurar a minha situação legal no país — através do contrato de trabalho, dos rendimentos, do pagamento de impostos e da segurança social. Tratava-se de uma função numa empresa de outsourcing de serviços de apoio ao cliente, prestando

assistência a consumidores norte-americanos de língua chinesa em nome de empresas sediadas nos Estados Unidos. O inglês era a língua de trabalho interna, enquanto o chinês era utilizado para o apoio direto ao cliente.

A entrevista decorreu de forma positiva e acabei por receber a oferta. Apesar de ainda estar a estudar, aceitei o desafio. Como o horário de trabalho seguia o fuso horário dos EUA, fazia o turno da noite em Portugal, o que me obrigava a conciliar as aulas durante o dia com o trabalho até à meia-noite. Foi um período bastante exigente e, em parte, acabou por atrasar a conclusão da minha dissertação. Contudo, considero que foi um sacrifício necessário e útil para a consolidação do meu percurso académico e profissional em Portugal.

3. Emprego atual

Atualmente trabalho no setor das tecnologias de informação, numa das empresas líderes da área, integrando o departamento de vendas. Exerço funções como Customer Success Manager, sendo a minha principal responsabilidade acompanhar os nossos clientes empresariais (B2B) na adoção das nossas soluções de software, garantindo o seu uso eficaz e promovendo a renovação dos contratos.

4. Redes ou apoios que facilitaram a entrada no mercado de trabalho

O meu primeiro emprego em Portugal surgiu através de contactos informais com outros membros da comunidade chinesa, mais concretamente através de informações partilhadas na rede social chinesa WeChat. Já as oportunidades seguintes — nomeadamente o trabalho em regime de outsourcing para a Microsoft e a minha função atual — encontrei-as através da plataforma LinkedIn, que se revelou essencial para expandir a minha rede profissional e identificar ofertas adequadas ao meu perfil.

5. Consideração sobre abrir um negócio próprio

Sim, sempre considerei a possibilidade de criar o meu próprio negócio e até hoje procuro uma oportunidade adequada. Acredito que trabalhar por conta de outrem dificilmente permitirá alcançar a liberdade financeira, enquanto o empreendedorismo pode oferecer maiores possibilidades nesse sentido. Atualmente encontro-me ainda a acumular a minha "primeira poupança" que me permitirá, no futuro, investir no meu próprio projeto.

6. Contributo do emprego atual para a integração em Portugal

O meu trabalho tem tido um papel fundamental na minha integração em Portugal. Graças ao contacto diário com colegas portugueses, tenho oportunidade de praticar a língua, criar amizades e conhecer melhor o estilo de vida local. Esta convivência ampliou as minhas interações para além do círculo de colegas da universidade ou da comunidade chinesa, aproximando-me mais da sociedade portuguesa no geral.

7. Interação com colegas portugueses e de outras nacionalidades

Os meus colegas caracterizam-se por serem prestáveis e abertos. Para além do ambiente profissional, demonstram disponibilidade para conviver fora do trabalho, revelando uma combinação da hospitalidade tipicamente portuguesa com uma mentalidade internacional e inclusiva, própria de quem trabalha em empresas globais. Não são julgadores nem exclusivos.

Com o passar do tempo, sinto que estas relações se tornaram mais sólidas, e as amizades ganharam profundidade.

8. Desafios de adaptação ao ambiente de trabalho e à cultura portuguesa

Tive a sorte de iniciar a minha carreira em empresas internacionais, onde prevalece uma cultura de abertura e diversidade. No entanto, ocasionalmente encontrei colegas menos disponíveis para sair da sua zona de conforto, que preferiam relacionar-se sobretudo com outros portugueses, mesmo dominando o inglês.

Em termos culturais, no início tive alguma dificuldade em interpretar o humor e as brincadeiras próprias do contexto português, sem saber se se tratava de comentários discriminatórios ou apenas de piadas informais. Também é verdade que existem setores da população menos recetivos aos estrangeiros, algo que consigo compreender dado que, para muitos, o aumento do custo de vida é associado à presença de imigrantes. Muitas vezes, essa menor abertura corresponde a pessoas com menos recursos e oportunidades. Da minha parte, procuro respeitar e compreender essas perspetivas, mantendo uma atitude de empatia.

9. Sentido de pertença no trabalho

Sem dúvida que o meu trabalho contribui para o meu sentido de pertença. Antes de mais, proporciona-me a estabilidade financeira necessária para viver em Portugal, que é a base

de qualquer integração social. Para além disso, a empresa promove não só a realização de tarefas profissionais, mas também atividades de desenvolvimento pessoal e de convívio, o que facilita conexões genuínas com colegas. O ambiente de cooperação, de apoio mútuo e de incentivo ao crescimento individual faz-me sentir valorizada e incluída.

10. Influência do trabalho na perceção da sociedade portuguesa

Sim, o trabalho influenciou positivamente a minha perceção sobre a sociedade portuguesa. Embora tenha experienciado a dificuldade de encontrar emprego, especialmente em empresas locais, essa realidade permitiu-me compreender melhor os desafios sociais, económicos e políticos que o país enfrenta. Apesar disso, considero que a minha experiência profissional tem sido largamente positiva e tem reforçado a minha visão otimista sobre Portugal.

11. Redes ou relações sociais mais importantes para a integração

No meu ambiente de trabalho existem tanto grupos sociais inclusivos, compostos por colegas de várias nacionalidades, como canais criados especificamente para estrangeiros. Ambos desempenham papéis complementares: os primeiros fazem-me sentir tratada de forma igualitária, enquanto os segundos oferecem um espaço para partilhar experiências comuns, especialmente relacionadas com políticas públicas e questões práticas da vida de imigrante.

12. Participação em associações ou grupos da comunidade chinesa

Não participo ativamente nas associações ou grupos da comunidade chinesa em Portugal. Sinto que muitos deles são ainda dominados por lideranças tradicionais, com uma postura demasiado conservadora e centrada em interesses próprios. Essa abordagem não corresponde ao tipo de integração aberta e colaborativa que procuro.

13. Mudanças ou apoios desejáveis para melhorar a integração dos migrantes

Acredito que seriam muito úteis associações jovens, abertas e verdadeiramente inclusivas, que organizassem atividades e palestras capazes de empoderar trabalhadores migrantes de diferentes idades e géneros. Tenho o desejo de, no futuro, poder assumir um papel ativo como líder comunitária, promovendo uma rede de apoio genuína, sem desconfiança ou exploração, que realmente abrace e valorize os imigrantes.

14. Aspirações profissionais e pessoais para o futuro

A curto prazo, gostaria de permanecer em Portugal, valorizando o equilíbrio entre vida pessoal e profissional e a proteção legal que o país e, de forma geral, a Europa oferecem. Contudo, reconheço que em Portugal é difícil alcançar uma boa estabilidade financeira. Assim, no futuro, não excluo a possibilidade de emigrar para outros países europeus com rendimentos médios mais elevados.

Appendix V – Interview: Researcher

Interviewer: Cármen Marques
Interviewee: Researcher at a Portuguese University

Date and format: October 22nd, phone interview (transcript)

Cármen Marques (CM): Could you tell me a little bit about how you came to Portugal and why you choose to come here?

Researcher (R): I came to Porto for the first time in 2016. At that time, it was a long story, I met my current boss in a conference, when I was getting my PhD. At that time the researcher center was the host of the conference the following year. I talked to him and he told that they would open several positions for researchers, so he encouraged me to come here. But after my PhD graduation I moved to Singapore actually. But there I felt the pressure was quite high, so I considered his offer and then moved to Portugal. So I moved here because of my job, but here the weather is quite nice and people are very friendly, nice food. I would like to stay here for a longer time.

CM: Could you tell me about finding your first job? You had met your current boss already, but did you then have to apply, have an interview, anything like that?

R: At that time, that was just an oral offer. After I moved to Singapore one day I sent him an email saying that I would like to come here to work, and then he invited another professor and three of us to a skype interview in English, and then he asked me about my research background, interest, several things. And then he already knows my CV, so after one week he confirms to me that he would offer me the job.

CM: Can you tell me what your support network is like? Do you think it's more the Chinese community? Do you feel you have a support network in your job, or do you have friends you feel are more of a support?

R: I am quite open to everyone, I have Chinese friends, Portuguese friends, Brazilian, German, Russian, Bolivian, so I have many friends here, who are very helpful.

CM: Have you ever thought about opening a business instead og having a salaried job, and why or why not?

R: Myself, no. But I sometimes encourage my friends to open their own business. For example, I have some Chinese friends here, who were born here, and they study in the university and Ater they don't want to continue studying, so I ask them "why don't you open something, a Chinese shop, restaurants, a bubble tea shop", you know? Many opportunities in Porto.

CM: How would you say that your relationship is with your colleagues? Is there a difference with Portuguese colleagues?

R: I meet them everyday, they are quite talkative. They will like to share with you everything in their life, we will talk about football, politics, boats, several weeks ago the elections. It is quite interesting, and sometimes we have dinner outside together in Chinese or Portuguese restaurants.

CM: What would you say were the biggest challenges in your integration into work culture and Portuguese culture as a whole?

R: I think first of all is the language. That is my personal difficulty, my other friends here speak Portuguese very well, I try my best, I attended the Portuguese classes, I spent one year there. Eventually I got my A1 certificate, but it doesn't help too much. The language is one thing.

Another thing, most of the places, people still tend to not talk with you or share everything in English. So I think the language barrier is the difficulty here.

CM: So you feel that your job has influenced your perspective on Portuguese people and culture, and if yes, positively or negatively?

R: I think is difficult to say. My job is far from the culture. The only thing is the working culture. When we work in the same project together, preparing for a proposal, usually my Portuguese colleagues are very casual. I think that's the total difference. We are very serious, we Chinese we take everything, every detail seriously. But my colleagues, sometimes the deadline is tomorrow and they start talking about the project today.

CM: Do you associate or participate in events made by Chinese associations?

R: Yes! I think I attended a lot. Like the Confucius institute, im not sure if you know it. They have different parties, like mid autumn festival, Chinese spring festival, many

festivals and celebrations. They make parties, they make dumplings, everything. So I usually attend, and that is one.

The other one is Chinese student association, but that is more for students. Sometimes they also have some parties or meetings, and I attend because I would like to know and network and meet possible collaborators.

CM: What would you say are the changes you personally would like to see I the system to help integrate foreign workers better?

R: That's another good question. I couldn't really give any suggestions. First of all, foreigners should be self-motivated tp join or to love the local culture here. Like, many Chinese students here, they come here but they only talk to Chinese, and I don't think thts a good thing. They should be more open to local communities, to make more Portuguese friends, to know more about life here, daily life here. Not always talk to Chinese friends and watch videos on WeChat. That could be a waste of time for them.

The other thing is language classes are very important. Something good is, I think the local government opened many language classes here for free for immigrants The class I want to was opened by a public church, they charge 10€ for people working, and make it free for students.

CM: My last question nis, what are your professional aspirations for the future, if you like to stay in Portugal, go somewhere else, or even return home eventually?

R: I have my permanent residence here, I love it here. Being here, life is balanced, everything is good. I would say that I am here permanently, maybe. But sometimes I return to China for holidays, at the moment this is how I feel.

But if you talk about professional aspirations, for a future in Portugal, I think it could be a little bit tough. The universities here open very limited positions, and I think most of the positions they open to local people only, not immigrants.

CM: Thank you, those are all my questions.