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Beyond friends and foes: immigration policymaking in contemporary China

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Summary

This dissertation examines China's politics of immigration in the 21st century. In this period, the China's global reintegration as part of its reform and opening up since the 1980s intensified, leading to unprecedented levels of transnational exchange, including of human mobility from and to China. At the same time, China's Communist Party has remained wary of internationalization when deemed at odds with its aim of domestic control. This project interrogates this tension in China's reform-era state-building by focusing on immigration policy, which lies at the nexus of domestic and global state concerns. A growing literature has documented the emergence of China as an immigrant destination, showing its diversity in this period. This forms a contrast with the pre-reform period, when the number of immigrants in the country was much smaller, and foreign nationals tended to be politicized as 'friends' or 'enemies' of the regime. However, the factors shaping state attitudes to growing immigration and related policymaking have remained under-explored. This thesis therefore asks: What can Chinese immigration policymaking tell us about China's ongoing state transformation as a global power?

Drawing on methods from political science and sociology, the thesis is based on a body of 100 interviews collected in mainland China (2018-2020), coupled with survey, policy and media analysis. It is built around five strategically selected cases, which zoom in on central-level, local-level and state-society immigration reform dynamics. Following the introduction, first, a case study of national-level institutional reform, lays out key drivers and obstacles around the establishment of China's National Immigration Administration (NIA) in 2018 (Chapter 2). I show how the NIA reflects a growing state ambition to expand and strengthen China's immigration governance, while at the same time its reform agenda has faced considerable implementation challenges. Then, complementing case studies on local-level policy experimentation discuss two ends of the spectrum of economic migration, the core of China's immigration system: high-income professional migration reforms in metropolitan Shanghai (Chapter 3), and low-income labor migration reforms in the Southwestern region of Guangxi, bordering Vietnam (Chapter 4). Because of their dynamism, China's major cities and border regions have attracted the vast majority of immigrants to China and are particularly meaningful sites for examining policy reform conditions. However, in both Shanghai and Guangxi, I find that these reforms are selectively implemented, challenged by conflicting goals within the bureaucracy, in which security goals increasingly outweigh developmental priorities, and a growing concern about the Chinese public's response to immigration. Finally, I examine societal immigration attitudes (Chapter 5), and elite-public interactions surrounding a controversial immigration reform (Chapter 6). I show Chinese immigration attitudes are more moderate and diverse than usually found in studies focusing on online discourse, and argue that public opinion, especially that of

‘ultranationalist’ online commentators, are an increasingly relevant factor in Chinese immigration policy-making.

Together, these case studies provide new empirical material and insight into China’s immigration policy landscape and the dynamics behind the emerging politicization of immigration. They expand the existing knowledge base on Chinese immigration politics and provide insight into China’s broader state transformation, with a focus on three cross-cutting topics: 1) the factors driving change and continuity in China’s immigration policy; 2) how state actors manage tensions between developmental pragmatism and the increasing policy focus on governance and security; and 3) the extent to which societal attitudes towards immigration are a policy factor. Throughout the case studies, the thesis also situates China’s immigration policymaking comparatively, analyzing how China fits with regional and global patterns of immigration policy-making in an early-stage immigrant reception context. As an immigrant-receiving authoritarian state, the case of China is also essential to an emerging literature of immigration politics outside Western, democratic or high-income contexts.

The thesis shows that China’s state response to the growing numbers of foreign migrants settling in the country is especially shaped by a mix of domestic political dynamics and national identity concerns. While state ambitions for a more comprehensive immigration strategy have increased, these constraining factors make implementing planned policy reforms more difficult. With the developmentalism of the early reform era replaced by more comprehensive state control, Chinese immigration management, too, has shifted from (informal) accommodation of economic migration, especially at the local level, to strengthened enforcement of its rigid legal migration framework combined with top-down policy reform. However, this reform agenda lands in China’s fragmented bureaucracy, and is attracting controversy within an ideological environment favoring nationalism and national security. This implementation context makes policymakers once again consider immigration a politically ‘sensitive’ policy issue, and activates a conservative bias in China’s immigration policymaking. Within China’s institutional politics, this prioritizes security-oriented reforms and makes it more difficult to advance more liberalizing institutional priorities.

China’s state treatment of its diverse immigrant population provides insight into internal tensions within China’s broader state strategy. At the same time, however China’s immigration politics should not be studied as a unique case, but contextualized within global political trends in which states and populations respond to the effects of unbalanced development and globalization around the world. Increasingly selective and security-oriented immigration policy has been an outcome of a repoliticization of collective identities in many countries and regions.

In its conclusion, the thesis discusses the implications of this research for the study of Chinese migration and internationalization, Chinese policymaking and global migration politics. Key points include the overlapping political factors governing

China's immigration and diaspora attraction; the ways in which societal responses to China's internationalization are more diverse than a dichotomy between nationalists and liberals suggests; the impact of a centralizing policy environment on policy innovation, and the ways in which China's immigration politics shares significantly with that of other places, perhaps more than would be expected based on existing scholarship emphasizing differences across developmental status or regime type. Finally, it considers how this research might speak to societal and policy debates on a rising 'global China', from the position of immigrants in the growing US-China rivalry, to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on China's immigration management, and the question of whether foreign migrants in China must remain 'sojourners' – and what role immigration reform might play in that process.