

Book Review

GLJ-RC44 Book Panel Melbourne 2023

Eli Friedman (2022) *The Urbanization of People: The Politics of Development, Labor Markets, and Schooling in the Chinese City*. New York: Columbia University Press. 352 pp. ISBN: 9780-231205-092. US\$140 (Hardcover); US\$35 (softcover).

Reviewed by
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[Editors' note: At each meeting of the Research Committee on Labour Movements (RC-44) of the International Sociological Association, the Global Labour Journal organises an Authors-meet-critics panel as part of the RC-44 programme. This review and two others in this section were first presented at the June/July 2023 ISA Congress in Melbourne, Australia.]

Over the past four decades, China has absorbed not only global capital but also “surplus labour” from its vast countryside. These rural-to-urban migrants are denied equal citizenship rights despite increased intra- and inter-provincial mobility. *The Urbanization of People* offers an incisive critique of the contemporary Chinese political-economic and spatial development by analysing the role of the state in regulating flows of people into cities. Eli Friedman uses Marxist and Foucauldian approaches to examine the incorporation of internal migrant populations in the great transformation and discusses the exclusion of rural migrants from access to urban public resources for social reproduction of human life. Through the case of migrant education, the book convincingly shows that migrant parents, grandparents and children, as well as schoolteachers, suffer indignity produced and perpetuated by the Chinese state.

The introductory chapter asks, “[W]ho will be urbanised in which spaces, why, and to what effect” (p. 7)? During the 1980s and 1990s, the reform-minded government began to gradually lift decades-old restrictions on rural labour outmigration to fuel the growth of industry, service, and construction, particularly in fast-growing coastal cities where there were high levels of foreign direct investment. Tens of millions of peasants moved from the place of their official household registration to search for new opportunities in urban centres. As non-locals, however, they are not entitled to the public social services enjoyed by their city counterparts.

Friedman frames a “just-in-time” mode of urbanisation (chapter 1) to analyse Chinese cities’ attempt to bring together “appropriate quantities and qualities of capital and labour, in the right space and at the right time” (p. 22). Local officials have facilitated healthy and moderately educated migrants to enter urban labour markets, often taking jobs that are disdained by city people. In this process of segmented incorporation, working migrants have been “urbanised as labour” but not

recognised as “full human beings” whose social reproduction on a generational basis is grossly neglected by both the government and employers. As family migration has become more common, the lack of access to city-based public education facing “brought-along children”, also known as migrant children, has drawn scholarly attention.

Under fiscal decentralisation, the city government gives priority to care for its permanent residents (chapter 2). Migrant children, on the contrary, must search desperately to find a school placement. Their parents can rarely enrol them in local public schools because they often lack educational credentials and skill certifications, stable employment (with a labour contract and social insurance contributions), and/or proof of legal residence. By 2012, Beijing was unofficially estimated to have 140 to 150 “migrant schools”, with the number of students at each school ranging from several hundred to nearly 2 000, attesting to the strong demand for schooling. The door of the public school remains tightly shut for migrant children, except for the very few who have exceptionally high test scores. In the “inverted welfare state”, Friedman points out, well-resourced families who are the least dependent on government have been provided with state educational resources, while those who lack economic and cultural capital are left to make do on their own. In this way, local states intervene in one’s life (and death) through unequal distribution of vital public goods.

Before zooming in to analyse the turbulent world of the migrant school, Friedman emphasises that his concern is “not to account for the development process in general, but rather the more specific problem of how power works to coordinate distributions of labour and capital in time and space” (p. 231). This inquiry focuses on “a spatiotemporal matrix” of living labour “in relationship to capital” (p. 235). Chinese rural migrant workers must be “made to live” day to day, whether they are housed in factory-provided collective dormitories, makeshift sheds on construction sites, or any other type of human settlement. Many low-income people are segregated and placed in “villages in the city”, where the rent is lower than average.

The spectre of “overpopulation” exceeding the “carrying capacity” of cities is, nevertheless, haunting China. Beijing, for example, has hardened population management to achieve its developmental goals. In the name of upholding law and order, the authorities have again and again demolished illegal housing structures under their jurisdiction. In the 2010s, the central leadership accelerated the relocation of “noncapital functions” from its urban core to peripheral areas, and in some cases entirely outside of the capital. Migrants, including long-term settlers, are frequently uprooted and ejected by successive territorial restructuring. They are measured against the labour market-centric metrics and are expelled as a “low-end” population.

Real estate developers, state-owned or private, are likewise incentivised to bulldoze older single-story buildings, informal housing and self-run migrant schools to give way to high-value-added projects. Nonetheless, the author notes, “the population and capital expansion more broadly are still dependent on the existence of subordinate social groups” (p. 266). The expulsion of migrant workers from local labour markets, skilled and unskilled, has inevitably driven up the cost of production. In particular, small employers are heavily reliant on “flexible”, informal labour to produce various kinds of services and products in a cost-effective way. The interests of some fraction of capital in accommodating the right kinds of labour, therefore, are somewhat distinct from the interests of the state.

For economic growth and socio-political stability, China has stepped up its policing of the movement of people from within the country. Drawing from multi-sited fieldwork during three trips between 2011 and 2014, Friedman details how cities use a wide array of biopolitical techniques to attain “population control via education” (chapters 3–6). In Beijing alone, at least 76 migrant schools were closed or demolished from 2010 to 2018, affecting at least 46 965 students. Physical

elimination of migrant schools is a major, and especially brutal, tool deployed in “the urban state’s population management regime” (p. 189). The underclass of migrants, who are rendered “surplus” and dehumanised as “waste”, are closed off from even the last option of informal schooling.

The relative weight of political and economic considerations involved in massive school demolitions cannot be clearly distinguished. What is clear is that migrant children are continuously expelled from urban space. Every time district- or city-level governments shut down migrant schools on short notice, the marginalised groups are forced yet again to live with the trauma of displacement. Some migrants may have adapted to persistent circular and split-family forms of migration. More typically, a grandfather speaks of his and his grandson’s recurrent relocations this way: “We’re just afraid of demolitions” (p. 187).

At three observed migrant schools, Friedman found that the annual turnover of both students and teachers exceeded 25 per cent. The migrant school is a space of “concentrated deprivation” with limited funding and substandard facilities. Teachers serve as “reproductive shock absorbers” on the frontline, performing affective labour to nurture the students, and oftentimes continue to work outside school hours as parents toil all day long in informal jobs. After eviction, aggrieved teachers and parents occasionally join hands to demand resettlement, yielding positive outcomes in a few high-profile cases. Yet many other localised protests have been violently repressed.

There are more than 100 million “left-behind” and migrant children from all over China being thrown into multiple life-denying crises. For some displaced migrants, sending their children out of the city for rural schooling in their registered hometowns is not feasible, as no one is left there to look after the “returned” kids. Staying in the city and resettling somewhere closer to a new school and workplace (cum living place) is also challenging. As land is capitalised in the urban centre, migrant schools are increasingly being cleared for commercial and luxury residential redevelopment. The “peripheralisation of available school options” causes huge stress and time pressures on parents, who need to confront the separation of “the spaces of production and reproduction within the city” (pp. 176–77). Moreover, the socio-psychological harms inflicted on dislocated students can be acute and long-lasting.

The Urbanization of People reveals how the Chinese state enables (some) freedom of movement for labour but not for migrants as whole human beings. Under-resourced migrant children are excluded from both private and public schooling in urban areas. By contrast, well-educated and talented young people are welcome to build their homes in elite cities. Class and educational inequality will likely persist as long as this model of managed migration is maintained. This important book will appeal to social scientists interested in comparative urbanisation, biopolitical governance, and equality of opportunity for citizenship.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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