

Tom Miller, *China's Urban Billion: the Story behind the Biggest Migration in Human History* (London, New York: Zed Books, 2012), 168p. \$25.27 paperback

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China is undergoing massive urbanization as a result of economic and demographic factors and deliberate government policy. Indeed, according to some estimates, over 1 billion people will live in cities by 2030. The optimistic view is that urbanization will promote higher incomes, balanced economic growth, and better service delivery. The pessimistic view is that China's urbanization will produce hundreds of millions of underclass citizens, sprawling, hideous, and polluted urban jungles, and cities that contribute little to China's economic rebalancing. In his book, *China's Urban Billions*, Tom Miller, the managing editor of *China Economic Quarterly* (CEQ) and a former journalist, promises to address two pressing questions relating to China's urbanization: What kind of lives will China's urban billion lead and what is the future of China's cities?

China's *Urban Billions* consists of six chapters, excluding the introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 overviews evolving government migration policies, migration patterns, and the failure of China's *hukou* (household registration) system to provide full social benefits to rural migrants. Miller observes the current system condemns millions of rural migrants live in poor conditions, "treated like illegal immigrants in their own country" (p. 5). Chapter 2 delves into efforts to reform the *hukou* system. While local reforms have occurred, many cities are worried about the cost of genuine reform and thus have ignored it. Chapter 3 turns to issues associated with land reform, which are important because land rights can produce rural migrants with the economic wherewithal to live true urban lifestyles and foster the level of agricultural productivity needed to support massive urbanization. Some localities like Chongqing have developed creative programs such as land-credit (*dipiao*) systems to allow farmers to extract more from their land, but these schemes have limits.

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Chapter 4 describes multiple factors leading China's urbanization to produce urban sprawl, including thousands of large industrial zones and the disappearance of precious farmland. Chapter 5 looks at the issue of "ghost towns," the ugliness of China's mega-cities, and pollution, transportation, and other problems associated with massive urbanization. Chapter 5 ponders whether or not the rural consumer has really emerged. In his conclusion, the author contends that to make urbanization work, China must abandon collective land ownership, dismantle the current *hukou* system, and redesign the country's fiscal systems. Elsewhere, he argues for more public housing, denser cities, additional central government financial support, and more public transportation to ensure "China's cities are truly civilized" (179).

China's Urban Billions has a number of shortcomings. First, it attributes China's lack of urban slums (in contrast to India and Africa) to China's authoritarian political system, which effectively controls migration and supplies adequate housing and infrastructure. This ignores, however, the important buffering role played by China's rural land tenure system, which protects migrant peasants by giving them the opportunity to return to their villages if they do not succeed in the cities. Second, it exaggerates the problems of the current land tenure system and does not provide convincing evidence to prove that the privatization of rural land will benefit farmers. Indeed, Qian Forrest Zhang and John A. Donaldson [1] argue that privatization "would only exacerbate class inequality and social tension" and maintain that strengthening the current system offers the best route to "increasing investment in land and agricultural productivity, promoting scaled-up modern agriculture, protecting farmers' land rights and preventing land grabs, enhancing rural livelihoods."

Beyond these issues, it is not entirely clear what conclusions one should draw from the book's many anecdotes and mini-case studies given that there is no systematic attempt to compare or analyze them. Fourth, given that the book is largely a narrative treatment of the topic of China's urbanization and not a theoretical one, the book does not really provide the tools needed to answer the two central questions that it claims it will address. Finally, the book could have been substantially condensed since much of its content is repetitive and, towards the end, the book seems to be a patchwork of articles previously written by the author and other contributors to *CEQ*.

Despite these criticisms, *China's Urban Billions* is an informative and highly readable book that tackles an important and timely topic. In opening a window to China's historically unprecedented urbanization, it will be useful to students of Chinese politics and public policy specifically and those concerned with urbanization, environmental, and social development issues generally. The book's abundant stories and interesting mini-case studies make it appropriate for undergraduate courses at all levels.

Reference

1. Zhang, Qian Forrest, and John A. Donaldson. 2013. China's Agrarian Reform and the Privatization of Land: a contrarian view. *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(80): 255–272.

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