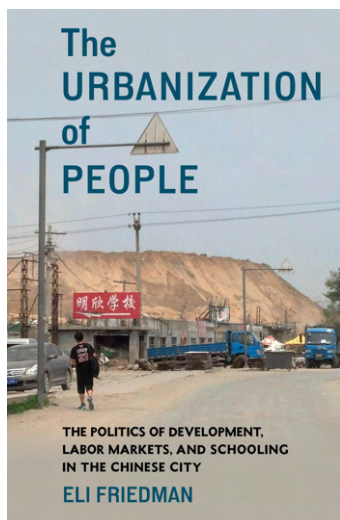


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# Book Reviews

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**Eli Friedman 2022: *The Urbanization of People: The Politics of Development, Labor Markets, and Schooling in the Chinese City*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press**



In his latest book, using the lens of migrant schools, Eli Friedman unveils the persistent contradiction in China's urban political economy: the inclusion of a large migrant population in cities as a cheap workforce and their simultaneous exclusion as urban citizens entitled to welfare provision. The author initially set out to examine migrant schools—generally fully privatized and often without official licensing—as workplaces where teachers have to cope with substantial class sizes, high levels of student turnover and inadequate facilities. However, the dire teaching conditions eventually became a window for him to observe the broader process of how the central state manages the population in and out of the cities by controlling migrant families' access to urban public education. Drawing on interviews with teachers, school administrators and migrant families as well as immersive fieldwork in a carefully selected sample of migrant schools in Beijing and several other cities, *The Urbanization of People* illuminates a meticulous and coercive system that

effectively removes the provision of education—essential to migrant children's wellbeing and class mobility—from the urban grid.

The book tackles an intriguing puzzle in urban governance: how does the central state of China exclude the very people that are critical to sustaining its growth? China's urban governance juggles between the perceived social instability brought about by overpopulation and the risks of diminishing business profitability if the workforce is too heavily controlled. In Western countries, this tension is resolved through immigration control and business offshoring, or domestic and often racist labor management. China, however, continues to rely on its internal labor force and has yet to externalize the tension.

To address the puzzle, Friedman proposes the framework of 'Just-in-Time' (JIT) urbanization—adapting the well-known concept from the Toyota Production System—to capture the state's approach to a flexible form of population management that aims to maximize productivity and minimize reproductive labor costs. Essential to JIT urbanization is a system of evaluative metrics implemented by urban governments to justify the uneven distribution of urban social welfare (public education resources in this study) based on citizens' perceived 'quality' (*suzhi* in Chinese). By internally dividing the citizens into 'a core group who enjoy a variety of rights' and a contingent workforce whose access to social services

is 'a revocable privilege rather than a right' (p. 38), JIT urbanization sustains the exploitative developmental regime.

After a theoretically rich chapter delineating the politics of population management in capitalistic accumulation, chapter 2 accomplishes two functions: it explains why there has been this shift to the JIT approach in urban China and shows how the *hukou* system allows urban governments to preserve public school resources for the most 'deserving' citizens. Friedman reasons that the development of a post-industrial consumer-driven economy in major cities has motivated the state's call for the 'urbanization of people' (p. 51), aiming to increase a permanent urban population suitable for both production *and* consumption. Correspondingly, the point-based *hukou* system—a recently revised household registration system—allows urban governments to grant urban citizenship to people perceived as the most desirable human capital based on various metrics such as educational attainment, home ownership, their social insurance payment record and employment status. Migrant families, in contrast, are least qualified within the new system and subject to increasing social control because they work in informal jobs, rent informal housing, and often lack social insurance payments.

In the rest of the book, Friedman connects the *hukou* system to the provision of education and the perspectives of migrant parents, teachers and school administrators as they face squeezed urban opportunities. He takes us not only through the dilapidated classrooms and playgrounds of the migrant schools but also to the sites of school closure and demolition where state violence is most overt. By carefully weaving institutional practices into the day-to-day conditions of migrant schools, the author demonstrates the socio-spatial hierarchy that divides the haves from the have-nots as China aims to develop its high-end urban economies.

Among the book's most critical insights is the complex system of exclusion and expulsion the state has built beneath its pro-urbanization rhetoric. The point-based *hukou* system functions as a total institution—using Foucault's concept—that further differentiates migrants who have not yet become urban citizens into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' categories on the basis of their market value and regulates their different reproductive opportunities by controlling access to public education. It normalizes the ideology of population optimization expressed as 'elite cities for elite people, low-end places for low-end people' (p. 220). This development unveils the conspiring relations between the state and the market in perpetuating social inequality.

Empirically, this book distinguishes itself in urban China studies by revealing the hidden costs of reproductive labor borne by the most disadvantaged citizens. While Friedman did not directly interview migrant children, his conversations with migrant parents reveal the immense emotional toll of the constant uncertainties brought about by family separation or relocation due to migrant school expulsions or the denial of entry into public schools. Adding to the families' strained emotions, Friedman shows how teachers offer an emotional cushion to migrant children in the face of volatile and often violent state policies by taking on the double role of both educator and emotional caregiver. Although well-meaning, this results in the teachers' own reproductive labor being highly exploited.

In several places Friedman compares China's place-based biopolitics to race-based biopolitics in the West and suggests that the *hukou* system shows the state's 'willingness and ability to *sacrifice its own race*' (p. 26, emphasis in original) for its development. While the comparison shows case-specific sensitivity, it is unclear how this reference connects to the empirical basis of the study. Since racial variation does not form part of the analysis, it is difficult to understand from the evidence how the consideration of race or ethnicity plays a role in the state-structured *hukou* system or what impact *hukou* has across ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, this is an essential question for future studies. As Friedman puts it at the end of the book: ‘how might China’s labor recruitment and population management regime be affected by the ongoing drive to secure growth?’ (p. 239). This is a question of direct concern to the intellectual community that cares about the Chinese state’s ongoing impact on social inequality—whether domestically or globally.

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