

Book Review

Tom Miller, *China's Urban Billion: The Story behind the Biggest Migration in Human History*, London and New York: Zed Books Ltd, 2012, 202 pp. + viii.

This is a book written by a British journalist, remarkably coming face to face with China's contradictory hotspots of discrimination related to registered permanent residence, land requisition, weak consumer spending, and population migration. As a foreigner, Tom Miller with outsider's point of view completed a book on the largest migration in human history. Through this book, the readers might again be amazed by the insights of this seasoned "China hand". The national policy guidance on urbanization, shackles of the household registration system, confinement of land policy and the mismatching of fiscal and taxation system were pointed out one by one by the author.

This book has six chapters. Chapter One shows the poor living conditions of migrant laborers in the city, including housing, welfare and children's education, which have resulted in a limitation of the laborer's spending power. Highlighted in the second chapter is the fact that the household registration system makes migrants unable to become a real citizen. The third chapter and fourth chapter respectively bring to the fore the social problems caused by the demolition and rural land reform, and the harsh environment of Chinese cities. In Chapter Five, the author

shows us how huge investments have paradoxically created an artificial “ghost town” without popularity. Finally, in Chapter Six it is brought to our attention the plight of the migrant laborers whose low spending power is constraining consumer demand.

The author’s arguments are both strengthened via detailed data and the use of real cases from witnesses. More importantly, it reveals to the world how China is engaging in this biggest “movement” in human history. Miller lived in China for more than a decade and traveled around China. With his reporter’s identity, he had been to many big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and even the fifth-tier small mountain villages to conduct interviews and produce reports covering a wide range of the general public for in-depth investigation and exposure. With rich life experience and solid journalism skills, Miller had a special perspective to observe contemporary China.

While critical, Tom Miller is nevertheless not accusatory in this book. There exists certain remarkable degree of understanding of the policies of the Chinese government. He strongly questions the rationality and legitimacy of segregation system of registered permanent residence (户口隔離制度), revealing the widespread phenomenon of corruption in demolition and rural land acquisition, as well as taunting shortsighted city designers about traffic planning and ugliness of buildings. Notwithstanding, he also points out that these sacrifices have served to support China’s economic development without the worse malaise of crash and famine. There are no malnourished children in China’s cities or towns, but such achievements cannot be possible by allowing free migration without social cost. It may even result in liquidity difficulties. Additionally, Miller also corrected unfair myopic reports from some Chinese and foreign medias on the “ghost towns”. He points out that these so-called “ghost towns” are gathering popularity, and even some new districts have a bright future as well.

Since the beginning of the Xi Jinping-Li Keqiang Administration, especially during the last two years, the government has hoped to use the new version urbanization policy to replace the original economy policies based on huge investments and real estates. Previously under the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao Administration, urbanization had turn out to mean selling the farmers' land, and then compelling the migrant workers to become second-class citizens in the cities. However, the migrant workers have turned out to be the main labor force of urban construction and business services. This is a method in which the city annexes the countryside. The present new version of urbanization is to upgrade the countryside into towns, rather than the annexation of countryside. Firstly, it is necessary to determine the land ownership. The farmers can reap the benefits in line with economic growth through the land, so that they can support themselves. Secondly, the new version of urbanization aims to deregulate the household registration system to make migrant workers citizens who enjoy equal benefits like others. Of course, this is still just a blueprint and beset with difficulties. It is worth mentioning that the government has accepted this suggestion, which Miller raised, that is to deregulate the household registration system. On 30th July 2014, the government canceled the "agriculture account" and "non-agriculture account" in the document "Suggestions about Furtherance of the Household Registration System Reform". Besides, Miller also raises the government's preference to use the gross domestic product (GDP) to reflect political achievements. In the year 2013, the leading official of the Communist Party of Chins (CPS) Central Committee Organization Department pronounced "Notice about Improving the Government Performance Examination in the Leading Team and Leading Cadres of Local Party and Government", which emphasized that government performance examination is not simply with regard to GDP.

The author, as a non-Chinese, might have certain limitations in fully understand the national conditions and political environment of China, but his portrayal of the Chinese urbanization and migration issues is penetrating. Besides, some of his recommendations is now also reflected the government's latest policy changes. Certain parts of the author's thoughts and suggestions could be debatable, including the forecast of the future of the "ghost towns", which may be lacking a more comprehensive analysis. Nevertheless, as a foreign journalist, Miller's effort in this book is commendable for paying attention to such a focal point which not only involves China's current economic development, but also determines the development trend of China. In any case, this book is absolutely worth reading. Regarding the author's observations, one can refute his views or query his conclusions, but it is difficult to avoid paying attention to the questions he raises in the book.

Zhang Yemo
Institute of Biological Sciences
Faculty of Science
University of Malaya
Malaysia

Zhang Yemo (張夜墨) is on the staff of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education/University of Malaya High-Impact Research (HIR) grant project "The China Model: Implications of the Contemporary Rise of China" (2013-2016) at the Department of Administrative Studies and Politics, Faculty of Economics and Administration, University of Malaya, and a PhD Candidate at the Institute of Biological Sciences, Faculty of Science, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. <Email: zhangyemo@siswa.um.edu.my>

Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal

Volume 1

Number 1

April 2015

ISSN 2410-9681

Editor's Foreword

- Changing Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: 1
An Update
Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh

Articles

- Beijing Replaces Washington's Dominant Position in 9
Latin America: Meet the New Boss. Same as the Old Boss?
Uziel Nogueira
- Sino-Pakistan Relations and the Challenges of Post-Cold War 37
Era
Mutahir Ahmed
- Rural China in Transition: Changes and Transformations in 51
China's Agriculture and Rural Sector
John A. Donaldson and Forrest Zhang
- Chinese Transformation Policies for 2015 and Beyond: 75
Quo Vadis?
Im-Soo Yoo

Book Review

- Biwu Zhang, *Chinese Perceptions of the U.S.: An Exploration of* 125
China's Foreign Policy Motivations (2012)
reviewed by Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh

