The Urbanisation of People: The Politics of Development, Labor Markets, and Schooling in the Chinese City (Columbia University Press, 2022), Eli Friedman offers a novel take on China’s handling of internal migration through the perspective of migrant workers’ children. Through ethnographic research and hundreds of in-depth interviews, he shows how the Chinese authorities in urban areas have been providing quality public education to the children of those nonlocals who already have high levels of economic and cultural capital, while leaving those considered ‘useless’ to fend for themselves in precarious, substandard private schools that are occasionally subject to forced demolition. In this conversation, he discusses the implications of his research for our understanding of the development trajectory of China and its workers.

Ivan Franceschini: Like many other scholars in Chinese labour studies, in your previous work, you mostly researched the manufacturing sector. In this book, you instead focus on schools for migrant children. Can you tell us a bit about these schools and why you chose this topic?

Eli Friedman: My interest in migrant schools grew organically out of my earlier research on labour politics. In my interviews with rural-to-urban migrants about their experiences in the workplace, I found that they were often greatly concerned with their children’s education in the city. This was becoming an increasingly important issue in the late 2000s as the workforce began ageing and more migrants were refusing to go back to the countryside, as had been the norm in years prior.

While I understood that migrant schools were a sociologically and politically important site for understanding working-class life, I initially was thinking of this project as squarely within labour studies. The first research I did focused on working conditions for teachers in the schools (this empirical work is now one of the book’s chapters). But I continually found that the kinds of problems teachers in migrant schools faced could not be explained simply within a labour – capital framework. As reproductive workers, it was impossible for me to separate teachers’ experiences from the social situation of their students. All the dislocations and stresses
that students faced as the children of working-class migrants were immediately reflected in the classroom. The thing that really brought this home for me was that an almost universal workplace grievance for teachers was the uneven abilities of their students. Parents’ extreme precarity in both labour and housing markets led to this perpetual churn of children in and out of the schools and establishing any kind of stability was nearly impossible for the teachers. This made me realise that I needed to have an analysis of what was happening with the broader urbanisation process to account for teachers’ experiences.

As for the schools, I was pretty taken aback at how bad the conditions were when I first visited. By the early 2010s, Beijing had many of the hallmarks of a big city in a developed country. But out on the periphery, these decrepit and severely under-resourced schools were a reminder of the poverty and exploitation that undergird the capital city’s fabulous wealth. Nonlocals coming into Beijing are not categorically excluded from the public schools, and anyone who can send their children there will do so. But the systems of evaluation that public schools use in granting admission favour the wealthiest and best-educated migrants. The consequence of this is that migrant schools are left to serve the poor and working-class students. Since the schools do not receive public subsidies—and in Beijing most of them are completely unlicensed—they are dependent on charging for tuition. This means that the schools are on shoestring budgets, with very poor infrastructure and extremely low wages for their staff. In the book, I dive into some of the diversity, and there are some schools that have been able to secure funding from foundations. Migrant schools in Beijing are, overall, significantly worse than in other megacities like Shanghai and Guangzhou, where the state provides some subsidies. But across the board it is apparent that the privatised migrant schools are way behind their public counterparts. This is not to denigrate the often-heroic efforts of teachers and parents, but the institutional support is simply not there to deliver quality education.

IF: In the summer of 2011, just weeks before the beginning of the school year, it was widely reported that the municipal government in Beijing had launched an offensive against migrant workers and their children by ordering the demolition of at least two dozen migrant schools. Safety was the excuse the authorities adopted at the time. Towards the end of 2017, Beijing used a fire in a building inhabited by migrants as a pretext to launch a mass eviction on the grounds that migrant dwellings were not safe. What was the real rationale behind these actions? Can Beijing be considered representative of broader trends in China when it comes to its treatment of its migrant population?

EF: Certainly, the explanation that the demolitions were to ensure safety does not hold up to scrutiny, as the people impacted by the mass demolitions generally ended up in similarly poorly constructed
buildings. And the 2017 evictions exposed tens of thousands of people to extreme vulnerability, as they were rendered homeless amid the cold of November in Beijing.

We can consider two more plausible explanations. One is an ‘accumulation by dispossession’ argument that the state wanted to redevelop the land and put it to more profitable uses. The other possibility is that it is a nativist desire to expel populations deemed undesirable. In fact, my argument is that both the economic and the political pressures were pushing in the same direction, and increasingly so, in the 2010s. Economically, this is a period when real estate comes to play an increasingly important role in the city’s economy. The outward expansion of the city creates opportunities for officials to cash in by removing relatively unprofitable activities such as migrant schools and informal housing and building high-rise apartments, malls, etcetera. So, we see an ongoing spatial peripheralisation of ‘low-end’ economic activity including recycling, warehousing, and labour-intensive manufacturing, all of which employ migrants.

At the same time, however, the municipal government came under incredible pressure from the central government to reduce population growth. The state has long been fearful that overpopulation would lead to social and political chaos, and this anxiety is particularly pronounced in Beijing. The government began to advocate moving ‘non-capital functions’ to Hebei—an impulse that got Xi Jinping’s imprimatur with the Beijing – Tianjin – Hebei integration plan. In 2014, the central government said that megacities like Beijing had to ‘strictly control’ population growth, while in 2017 they set a population ‘red line’ of 23 million. Street-level officials received quotas for population reduction and migrants were the easiest targets for ejection. And all of this was in fact quite effective; the city’s population began to shrink in 2017.

Beijing is definitely not representative in terms of its treatment of migrants. Particularly places like Guangzhou and Shenzhen that are relatively dependent on labour-intensive industries have taken a more lenient attitude. This is not to say migrants receive adequate schooling and housing, but rather that the government is more willing to let them stay and figure out their social reproduction via market mechanisms. It is important to understand the situation for migrants in Beijing not just comparatively but relationally as well. The 2014 national urbanisation plan makes it very clear that they want a redistribution of population away from the megacities and into small and medium-sized cities. It is indeed easier for rural migrants to get household registration (户口, hukou) and establish permanent residence in these smaller cities, but that is also because the basket of publicly provided goods is far inferior to what you get in the megacities. So, folks might be allowed to settle down in these places, but the kinds of schools and hospitals they can access will be a far cry from what the citizens of Beijing have. A somewhat
oversimplified but more or less accurate way to think about this is that they want ‘high-end people’ (高端人口) in high-end cities and ‘low-end people’ (低端人口) in low-end places. It’s important to understand Beijing as occupying the apex of this socio-spatial hierarchy, and the state wants to ensure that only a select few are admitted to that apex.

IF: In the book, you engage with scholarship not only in labour studies but also, more importantly, in urbanisation studies. In the process, you coin a new concept: ‘just-in-time urbanisation’. Can you please explain what you mean by this term, how it applies to the Chinese context, and its global implications?

EF: The central question in the book is to understand how megacities manage flows of people. The title is a subtle reference to and inversion of David Harvey’s *The Urbanization of Capital* (1985). Rather than departing from the perspective of capital, I wanted to understand how people—not simply as workers, but as full social beings—are urbanised, in which spaces, and to what effect. The phenomenon of Chinese cities allowing migrant workers in but denying them access to social reproduction, especially education, is in my view the central social contradiction in China’s urbanisation process.

To study this empirically, I analysed policies in Beijing and other cities to try to understand how they were regulating both access to *hukou* as well as admission to public schools for nonlocal *hukou*-holders. I was struck by how precise these plans are in trying to extend social services only to those people whom city officials imagine will assist in achieving developmental objectives. The clearest example is the point-based *hukou* admissions (积分入户), which grant more points to applicants for having higher levels of education, for paying more into the local tax base, and for purchasing property locally. In some cities, they make a list each year of the kinds of job skills that are in high demand and people with these skills can accumulate more points. In essence, I was seeing that the wealthy megacities were not concerned with excluding migrants in general, but rather they were using these administrative arrangements to try to pull in very specific kinds of workers. And cities could dangle the carrot of access to schooling and other social services to appeal to these so-called human talents (人才).

In reading through these documents and then talking to migrant workers about their efforts to enrol their children in public schools, it struck me how the state was treating them as these depersonalised bearers of labour power, as if they were just any other factor of production and their movement could be rationally coordinated as such. Drawing on my background in labour studies, this evoked some of the dynamics associated with ‘just-in-time’ production, but instead of auto parts, I was looking at labour.
According to Taiichi Ohno, the person most responsible for developing just-in-time principles at Toyota, the essence of just-in-time is to deliver parts in just the right quantities and qualities and at just the right time, all to reduce waste. A key reasoning of this approach is to let market demand ‘pull’ items through the production process to avoid overproduction, while allowing assembly plants to cut down on warehousing, which wastes space and labour. The concept is a bit more complex than this, but these key elements captured the essence of what I was seeing in the megacities’ efforts to regulate human movement. The array of evaluative metrics obstructing working-class migrants’ access to schooling and other social services are aimed at allowing only certain kinds of workers to settle down in the city. These metrics can (and do) change regularly to reflect the aspirations of the urban state, allowing them to regulate human movement in a dynamic and technocratic manner. Everyone who is deemed superfluous to local labour market demands is denied access to nominally public goods, and then subjected to expulsionary pressures. Finally, ‘warehousing’ here refers to those moments when workers are not productive for the economy, including during childhood and retirement, as well as when they might be sick or disabled. The city is not on the hook for maintaining life during any of these ‘waste moments’; they can pull in labour from the hinterland ‘just-in-time’ for it to be deployed at maximum efficacy and discard it when no longer needed.

It’s worth noting that this vision is utopian, in that it can never actually be achieved as people constantly move to places where they aren’t supposed to be. And in fact, if these cities’ very elite-oriented labour market policies were realised, they would deprive themselves of all the highly exploited labour that actually makes the cities run. Most of my ethnographic and interview research is focused on understanding the experiences of these populations living out of place.

Although I’ve developed this concept for thinking specifically about China’s megacities, it has applicability in different national settings and at different scales. Canada innovated point-based evaluations for immigrants, and the effect is quite similar. The United States and most other Western countries also have visas for immigrants with certain kinds of labour market skills. So, the basic idea that a polity will try to pull in some specific types of workers and only in limited quantities in response to perceived needs in the labour market is by no means unique to China.

When we turn to the question of scale, however, China is somewhat unique in that these kinds of just-in-time labour market approaches are deployed at the level of the city. The Chinese state has a much greater capacity to control the internal movement of its citizenry than is true for just about any other country, and the key mechanism they have for achieving this is fixing provision of state-subsidised social reproduction to specific locales. Just as
Canada or the United States might pull exceptional workers from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, Chinese megacities pull from the domestic hinterland. In other words, the operation of just-in-time principles can be observed at the urban, regional, national, and transnational scales. And indeed, I think of the regulatory mechanisms and expulsions of migrants in Chinese cities as very much in line with the kinds of bordering practices we see in Euro-America deployed against international migrants.

IF: Several years ago, some scholars compared the household registration system (hukou) in China to the apartheid regime in South Africa. Since then, the media has frequently reported on hukou reforms, sometimes even going as far as to triumphantly hail the end of the system (at least in certain areas). What is your assessment of these policy changes? And how have they affected migrant children?

EF: There have been real changes in terms of how hukou operates and it is indeed less restrictive than in the 1990s, when you had police in cities detaining and deporting rural migrants. Many places have relaxed restrictions on transferring to urban hukou, so there is some reason for optimism.

If we dig a little deeper though, there are ongoing problems. Over the past generation, we’ve seen that growing market-based forms of inequality in China in fact are predicated on and continue to interact with hukou-based forms of inequality. Much as with arguments about racial capitalism in other contexts, we see that capital has seized upon pre-capitalist forms of social hierarchy—that is, hukou—and that this relatively disposable portion of the population can then be subjected to forms of super-exploitation and dispossession that would be unacceptable for elites. A simplified way to think about this is that in China it is space rather than race that is the key social division undergirding capitalist exploitation.

If we view hukou and class as co-constitutive then there is not much cause for optimism. Because what we’ve seen with all the hukou reforms of recent years is that there is a relaxation in transferring rural to urban residency but only in the small and medium-sized cities. Often people are unwilling to transfer to urban hukou because it means giving up their land while receiving access to a thin set of social goods in these smaller cities. The regional fiscal disparities in China are quite shocking and the largest cities continue to monopolise the best schools, hospitals, and social services. The state is telling peasants and their children they can become urban citizens, but only in places with subpar welfare. When we situate the relative diminution of hukou within the country’s wildly unequal economic geography and class structure, there is little reason to hope this marginal relaxation in the citizenship regime will accomplish much with respect to reducing class and social inequalities. In fact, given that the best public schools in places like Beijing and Shanghai are
reserved for those people with already high levels of education and wealth, there is a good possibility that the reform process will only enhance class inequality.

IF: What lies in store for migrant children’s education in China? Will the kind of schools you discuss continue to play a role or will these children be integrated into the public education system?

EF: The central government’s stated aim for the past 20 years has been for migrant children to be primarily enrolled in public schools and for the associated expenses to be primarily borne by receiving areas. In Beijing and other cities, official numbers have reflected an increasing share of the nonlocal population being enrolled in public schools. We shouldn’t take official statistics at face value, as it is those people in the most informal situations who are also least likely to be counted. Nonetheless, it’s safe to assume that a larger share of migrant children in Beijing and elsewhere will be enrolled in public schools.

But we need to interrogate that general trend to fully understand what’s happening with respect to educational inequality. The first thing to note is that this shift toward more public-school enrolment in Beijing comes after years of expelling hundreds of thousands of children and their parents from the city and sending them back to the drastically underfunded rural education system.

The second point is that we see large cities moving toward a system where access to quality education is increasingly mediated by the real estate market. Public schools have had to adopt catchment-based enrolment, which in turn has resulted in rapidly increasing real estate prices in the areas around elite public schools (and many schools will only admit children of households that own rather than rent housing). This enhanced effect for class, however, still interacts with the state’s socialist forms of social hierarchy, as nonlocal hukou-holders are largely excluded from obtaining mortgages. And we see elite public schools requiring not only housing within their catchment areas, but also establishing their own residency requirements.

Finally, outside Beijing, many cities (especially those in Guangdong) have been much more relaxed about licensing migrant schools and leaving the question of education up to the market. The term ‘migrant school’ (打工子弟学校) evokes a working-class student body, but in fact, many such schools have evolved to serve a high-income, nonlocal clientele. So, migrant children in these cities aren’t subjected to the coercive ejection we saw in Beijing, but their ability to secure education increasingly maps on to their parents’ financial resources.
While *hukou* is not going away, the bases of educational and other forms of inequality are shifting as the old socio-spatial hierarchy is interacting with and solidifying new class hierarchies. It’s become increasingly clear that abolishing *hukou* would, at this point, only result in people being released into a market with wildly unequal resources. If Chinese society is not going to continue to ossify into rigid forms of inequality and domination then we’ll need to see radical interventions targeted at both *hukou* and wealth distribution.