

## Book Review: Jeremy L. Wallace, *Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution, and Regime Survival in China*

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Investigating the mechanism of authoritarian regime survival, Wallace's book provides us with some great insights into the relationship among China's rural-urban migration, urbanization and regime survival through a geopolitical perspective. He explicitly argues that it is through short-circuiting "the Faustian Bargain of urban bias" (p.121) that not only has the authoritarian regime in China successfully survived but also prospered in the past three decades.

First of all, Wallace's account of the authoritarian regime's survival in China fills in an obvious gap in literature. Based on a comparative perspective, Wallace unveils a long-ignored connection between migration-urbanization and Chinese politics, signaling a looming uncertainty in Chinese cities. While there has been an increasingly rich body of literature on China's unprecedented urbanization and rural-to-urban migration in recent years, the analytical perspective adopted by many scholars largely takes on either economic or sociological attributes only, leaving much of their relationship with politics unattended. As a result, Chinese migrant workers are normally considered an army of "floating population" seeking urban-based economic benefits only, and therefore are presumed outsiders to politics. It is not a surprise that academic interest is quite limited on the political consequence of migration and urbanization in the Chinese context. Among the reasons adding up to such a silence, there is a noticeable one: unlike those riot-torn cities in other developing countries, Chinese cities have been quite stable while a great cityward

influx of migrants has never stopped since its start in the 1990s.

More importantly, Wallace's book is an inspiring attempt embedding a spatial interpretation of political affairs into the context of conventional non-spatial political analysis. He realizes that paying close attention to the geography of urbanization, rural-urban migration and redistribution of resources in nondemocratic countries is the key to understanding the chances of authoritarian regime survival. Drawing on Michael Lipton's seminal theory of urban bias, which is called a "Faustian Bargain" throughout the book, Wallace starts from elaborating a measure adopted universally by nondemocratic regimes: placating urban dwellers to maintain the reign of the ruling class while taxing rural dwellers heavily and extracting natural and human resources from countryside. Furthermore, Wallace points out that this strategy is self-defeating in practice because it pushes more and more rural dwellers out of the countryside to seek a privileged life in the city. Then he observes that when the size of urban population keeps increasing because of urban-biased policy, the threat to the regime from a booming urban population, which consists of not only existing dwellers but also more and more newcomers, will escalate quickly. In other words, the geography, i.e., spatial distribution, of population and urbanization could pose a serious threat to the political stability that those nondemocratic regimes seek. As a result, Wallace concludes that "large cities are dangerous for nondemocratic regimes" (p.17) because

urban dwellers “enjoy an advantage in collective action due to their proximity to each other and the seat of government” (p.5).

Moreover, in discussing the longevity of the authoritarian regime and economic prosperity in China, Wallace correctly argues that the implementation of the hukou system, which reflects “the regime’s fears of population migration” (p.73), is one of the key factors, as major Chinese cities are expanding at an unprecedented speed. Specifically, using China’s slum-free cities as an example, Wallace keenly points out that while major cities in other developing countries are plagued by growing slums, Chinese cities are slum-free in general due to the implementation of hukou, and it is noteworthy that the non-existence of large-scale slums also contributes substantively to the longevity of the regime. Stated otherwise, while able to harvest the economic yields generated by a massive cityward migration, China has successfully found an alternative to the conventional urban-biased policy to avoid increasing levels of urban concentration and possible urban unrest. Put simply, the secret weapon is the hukou system. According to hukou specialists like Kam Wing Chan (2009), the critical role of hukou is far from being realized and acknowledged in China studies literature. Therefore, Wallace should be credited for his effort placing hukou in the center of debate. In addition, defining and then utilizing hukou as an indispensable key variable in his analysis, Wallace’s book provides readers with a convincing interpretation of a hard-to-imagine economic and political stability that China demonstrated after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, during which tens of millions of Chinese migrant workers lost their jobs in just a few months.

Regrettably, even though the merits of this book are considerable, there are some noticeable shortcomings that need to be addressed. For example, although Wallace has tried very hard to create a list of the key variables needed to decipher what he has called “three puzzles” (p.2), the book pays only little attention to the function of China’s two-tier land tenure system, let alone scrutinizes its relationship with regime survival. Without knowing the importance of Chinese rural

collective land ownership, one can barely explain why migrants keep circulating between city and countryside instead of settling in the city permanently, not to mention its political functionality as one of the most important survival strategies adopted by the regime. Although Wallace incisively points out that “the inability to sell off one’s rural land allocation due to the lack of land privatization became an asset rather than a liability for both migrants and government” (p.176), this trenchant observation, which should have led to more insights, simply ends accepting an expert’s opinion that views rural collective land ownership as a “social safety net” (p.176) for migrants. The fact is that the two-tier land tenure system is one of the pillars that back and perpetuate the Chinese rural-urban dual system, and is critical to the regime’s survival. Unfortunately, the functionality of such a meticulously designed system is largely ignored by many scholars, among whom Wallace is included. As for another major argument in the book, which claims that China is moving away from “urban bias”, political scientist Susan Whiting (2009) has clearly expressed concerns as to the validity of his reasoning. In fact, even Wallace himself is uncertain if China is saying farewell to its urban-biased policy, admitting “the political utility of China’s stubborn maintenance of the hukou system and collective ownership of rural land was evident during the Great Recession of 2008-9” (p.207).

In sum, among Wallace’s major contributions in his inspiring book, the one that has clear substantive importance is his effort introducing a spatial interpretation of migration/urbanization-stability dynamics to the studies of authoritarian regime survival, which is currently dominated by elite-centered analyses. Wallace’s book deserves credit and scholarly attention for highlighting a long-ignored relationship between rural-urban spatial dynamics and Chinese politics in the past decades. Specifically, within the Chinese context, the questions he has raised such as “how has the authoritarian regime survived an unprecedented rural-urban migration and urbanization” and “where are the slums in China” are of extra value to China scholars and observers.

## REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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