



Book Review

Sun, Wenkai. (2022). Population and Labor Market Policies in China's Reform Process. Routledge. ISBN: 9781032263915

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Book Review

In "Population and Labor Market Policies in China's Reform Process," Wenkai Sun, Professor at Renmin University's School of Economics and Associate Dean at the National Institute of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME), provides a meticulous exploration of China's shifting population policies from the late 1950s until 2016. Drawing on his expertise in labor and developmental economics, Sun employs a blend of historical narrative, empirical analysis, and insightful commentary to unravel the complexities of these policies and their profound influence on the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens. The book is structured to illuminate three broad dimensions of China's population policy: the hukou system, the one-child policy, and the country's social and economic inequality.

Sun's examination begins with an in-depth exploration of the household registration system, or Hukou, shedding light on its role in regulating internal population movements and shaping labor market dynamics. While historically aimed at controlling rural population growth for agricultural purposes and restricting access to megacities like Beijing, the Hukou system inadvertently fostered inequalities in income and welfare. State efforts to establish agricultural and non-agricultural Hukuo categories exacerbated individuals' access to big cities. A key reason was that social benefits like education, healthcare, and housing were tied to Hukou status, barring rural residents from urban resources and limiting their mobility. Strict entry requirements—such as employment restrictions, high taxes, and homeownership—further disadvantaged rural migrants. These barriers perpetuated existing inequalities and hindered economic development, particularly urbanization.

Sun delves further into China's family planning policy, commonly called the one-child policy. Despite its controversial nature, Sun argues that it was designed to regulate population growth and promote economic stability by encouraging smaller families, later marriages, and longer birth intervals. While the policy successfully lowered birth rates, it also created long-term demographic challenges, including an aging population, labor shortages, and gender imbalances, particularly in rural areas. Sun's analysis finds minimal evidence that these restrictions transformed societal behaviors, as families with one child showed no significant differences in marriage, entrepreneurship, or elder care compared to those with multiple children. The policy's unintended consequences eventually led to reforms allowing more children, challenging previous assumptions about its societal impact and contributions to China's development.

In the book's closing section, Sun tackles the intricate dynamics of income inequality and gendered income disparities exacerbated by population policies. This analysis serves as a

BOOK REVIEW

crucial bridge between the book's overarching themes, connecting the implications of population policies explored in earlier sections to broader societal and economic dynamics.

One of the book's notable strengths lies in its presentation of data and methodology, accompanied by clear explanations accessible even to non-experts in quantitative methods. While Sun provides a broad exploration of China's population policies, the book's structure is somewhat disjointed, comprising different articles on broader topics related to China's population policy. Each chapter incorporates data analysis and measurement, but the primary focus is on individual and social behaviors rather than an in-depth policy evaluation. Moreover, the liberal lens through which the policies are analyzed can sometimes lead to a narrow perspective, lacking nuanced critique. Sun's most substantial contributions appear in the first section and the closing chapter, where he successfully links empirical research to broader policy implications. However, in the middle chapters, this connection weakens, as findings are presented without sufficient engagement with relevant policy significance. Despite these shortcomings, the book remains a valuable resource for understanding China's policy landscape; it effectively outlines key policy shifts, historical context, and social repercussions.

Population and Labor Market Policies in China's Reform Process caters to a broad spectrum of readers, from specialists and advanced graduate students to individuals with a general interest in China's policy landscape. For specialists and academic researchers, the book's incorporation of quantitative methods and historical analysis provides valuable insights into China's demographic and labor policies. The book is most effective when linking empirical research to policy implications, yet it sometimes prioritizes data presentation over deeper critical analysis. Despite these limitations, the author's clear explanations and accessible style make it an informative resource for scholars and general readers interested in China's population policies and development trajectory.