Michelle Dammon Loyalka, *Eating Bitterness: Stories from the Front Lines of China’s Great Urban Migration*  

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Taking eight migrants’ stories as examples, the journalist Michelle Dammon Loyalka paints a vivid and detailed picture of everyday life in one of Xi’an’s urban villages (Ganjia Zhai) based on extended interviews she conducted in 2007. At the time of the interviews, the neighbourhood, which hosts an estimated 30,000 migrants, was about to be demolished for urban upgrading as part of Xi’an’s economic development program, which is a focal point in the Chinese government’s policy to further develop China’s western region (xibu da kaifa).

As suggested by the book’s title, “Eating Bitterness: Stories from the Front Lines of China’s Great Urban Migration,” the author emphasises her astonishment at the migrants’ patience and willingness to endure financial hardship and difficult living conditions and their trust in a better future or even their acceptance of the lack of a predictable future. Throughout the book’s chapters, each of which is dedicated to one migrant’s personal story, she points out the various important contributions migrants have made to the urbanisation processes in the neighbourhood, e.g., as construction workers, in the general services industries (child care, repair, food, wellness, etc.), and as petty traders offering affordable groceries, goods, and small services to urban inhabitants. Her interviewees include an employee of a beauty salon, a vegetable vendor, a knife sharpener on a bicycle, a recycler, a nanny, a female shopkeeper and hostel owner, a new landlord, and a proprietor of several convenience stores. By selecting different occupational backgrounds, different age groups, and representatives of both genders, she offers differentiated portraits of individuals rather than constructing a homogenous depiction of migrants in Xi’an.

With some of the migrants planning short-term survival over the coming days, weeks, and months, and others envisioning their long-term future in the city, she also describes the variations in their higher aims, values, and identities. For example, a male member of a family that received significant compensation for their land when urbanisation enclosed the former farming village of Ganjia Zhai constantly gambles due to boredom, since there is no need for him to work beyond collecting rent. The family kept one piece of land with their house in the urban village, to which they later added several floors to rent out to businesses and individual tenants. The man still holds a rural hukou and will only change to urban status upon moving to the new housing complex offered as compensation for the upcoming demolition of their current house. Moving to a newly-build and better-equipped apartment does not bring the anticipated life improvements, since the family will lose their rental income and social network. They have already moved beyond the level of survival and are seeking a life with social quality. In contrast, a couple selling fruits and vegetables on the streets every day of the year works extremely hard just for the education and future of their child, who accompanied them to the city, and the family endures living in a damp garage in hope of a better future. Another migrant husband and wife work as nanny and caretaker in two separate houses for an upper middle class family, while their own daughters stay with relatives in the countryside. The knife sharpener and recycler portrayed in the book just live day-to-day at their own pace. The young women working in a beauty parlour dream of a rapid self-made career in the beauty product business to bring about their own transformation in the context of globalised female worldliness and financial independence outside the social system of their home village.

By carefully analysing the migrants’ individual strategies for financial and occupational survival and further development, and their plans and hopes regarding settling down in the city, the author gives interesting insights into the direct impact of urban development and social transition on migrants living in an urban village. These processes produce challenges and barriers for the migrants, but also the economic niches that enable them to make a living in the urban space. Besides presenting the migrants’ perspectives on organisational and practical issues, she succeeds in catching glimpses of her interviewees’ state of mind, which reflect the country’s rapid social change and the search for a meaning in life beyond earning more money.

In her epilogue, the author predicts a change in the attitude of the younger generation of migrants, who might not be willing to “eat bitterness” (chi shi) endlessly without immediate reward in sight. She points out that even if migrant incomes have risen in recent years compared with, for example, university graduates, they still lack career development and social mobility, full access to the social security system, adequate housing, educational opportunities, health care, and labour rights. She mentions the increase in, but lack of implementation of, governmental policies to protect migrants’ rights and promote their integration into urban society. As an important structural issue, she names ongoing reform of the household registration system. Even if local test pilots provide more options for changing hukou status, many migrants hesitate to give up their household registration and accompanying land rights. She identifies the underlying reasons as the enormous difficulties migrants still face in the cities and improvements the government has made in the countryside, such as abolition of the agricultural tax and a subsidised rural health system. As an overall conclusion, she situates the migrants between “the nation’s traditional past and the modernized future,” as “a people in transition in a nation in transition,” as the “most brow-beaten” (p. 243), and as protagonists upon which urban and also left-behind rural communities strongly depend for progress and development.

This book, written for a more general professional audience, is extremely readable, with each portrait of a migrant’s life qualifying as a literary short story. With her background in journalism, the author might have included more aspects of the Chinese public media debate about city development, migrants of different generations, and social justice. Academic theoretical debates about migration and urbanisation are left out in favour of “the people’s stories,” which are edited and interpreted in a very convincing way.

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