REVIEW: *One Billion Customers: Lessons from the front lines of doing business in China*
by James McGregor
*Free Press, 336 pages, $27*

Reviewed by Clinton Dines

When you see Jim McGregor’s book in an airport bookshop, stacked between the rival publications in the China business section, you might be tempted not to give it a second glance. Between the cumbersome and derivative title and the obligatory glossy red cover, the immediate point-of-sales positioning of this work is not particularly compelling. Even Mr. McGregor’s well-nourished visage glowering portentously out of the back cover of some editions does little to dispel the impression that this is just another of those production-line “How-to-be-a-China-business-expert-in-12-quick-chapters” pulp nonfictions.

In fact, the book is a very distinctive offering worthy of an honored place on any executive Sinophile’s bookshelf. So just ignore the cover and try to steal it. Mr. McGregor is himself something like his book: not to be judged by first impressions. When he rumbled into Beijing in 1990 as a journalist with The Wall Street Journal, China was suffering under a post-Tiananmen malaise. Treated with great suspicion, foreign journalists were largely constrained from seeing anyone or going anywhere. Officials often rapped them over the knuckles for attempting to write anything remotely interesting. Mr. McGregor recounts his efforts to make contact with local people by trolling the parks using his young daughter as “interview bait” to create opportunities for interactions with leery local Chinese. Foreign business, too, was gun-shy, and assiduously avoided discussing their activities with the media. This was a frustrating period for all participants. Mr. McGregor’s subsequent experience—as head of Dow Jones’s business interests in China, which is the background to one of several very illuminating business episodes described in the book—was also challenging to the point of dismay. Such experiences caused many others to leave China in disgust and embark on a career of long-distance Sinophobic sniping that characterizes a great deal of what passes for informed China commentary these days.

Mr. McGregor has chosen to forego this type of judgmental negativity and the developed-world conceits which accompany it. It says much about the author, and adds immeasurably to the value of his book, that he rises above his bruising personal experiences in China and has abjured the sloppy approach of simply criticizing the Chinese way of doing things. Mr. McGregor cleaves to a uniquely balanced approach, tweaking both small Chinese and large foreign noses with cheerful equanimity.

It is this tone of affection for the Chinese as a people and for China as a business experience that really sets this book apart. China can be a vastly entertaining and stimulating place to live and work. Mr. McGregor captures this sense without giving any suggestion that the environment is anything but challenging.

Like any good storyteller, he spends the first couple of chapters setting the backdrop against which each of the subsequent vignettes are played out. Serious students of Chinese culture or society may quibble with some of the sweeping statements in the opening chapter. Mr. McGregor is a dab hand at sweeping statements, but the kernel of truth always saves him from being simply glib. Learned China historians will probably protest at the compressed, galloping second chapter: *China’s-last-200-years-of-history-for-the-uninitiated.*
But Mr. McGregor’s quick-fire points in these chapters are all well made, and both chapters are worth referencing again as the remainder of the book unfolds. The other distinguishing elements of this book are the writing, the quality of the research and the structure. Working with a good editor and liberated from the Wall Street Journal’s turgid news article structure, Mr. McGregor’s narrative flows and engages.

The content is exceptional. You may have heard of some or all of the business events recounted in One Billion Customers, but I guarantee you didn’t know the details—or even that there were as many details, players, events and machinations as Mr. McGregor has managed to dig up. One suspects that some of the people named in this book may be unpleasantly surprised to see their roles and behaviors so vividly displayed.

There are instances in which the author apparently takes a little poetic license—being in the room with President Clinton and Zhu Rongji, for example. But Mr. McGregor is one of the world’s great networkers, and has an amazing range of contacts and acquaintances. This is attested to by the five pages of people listed in the acknowledgements (including this reviewer). Even if Mr. McGregor wasn’t in the room, he probably knows someone who was!

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