

## Book Review

# Immobile Mobility: Young Migrant Women in Contemporary China

Siyuan Yin

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Cara Wallis, *Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones*, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013, 264 pp., \$40.05 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-8147-9526-2

China has been through a dramatic transformation since the economic reform era of the late 1970s. Wallis' ethnographic study offers engaged theoretical perspectives and concrete empirical analysis to reveal young migrant women's sufferings from, negotiations with, and resistance to structural constraints that accompanied China's modern development. Wallis focuses on young rural migrants' individual agency practices in everyday life by examining their mobile phone use. By drawing upon plentiful interviews and participatory observation with migrant women, Wallis explicates the constitutive relations among technology, subjectivity, and power in China's sociocultural context and articulates young migrant women's agency and self-development into the country's structural transformation toward urbanization, modernization, and marketization, as China's economic power plays an ever-increasingly significant role on the world stage.

The study that forms the backbone of her book, *Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones*, adopts extensive ethnographic methods, including participatory observation, semistructured interviews, and informants' diaries and discourse analysis to discuss mobile phone use of young migrant women who work in low-service areas in Beijing. Wallis' immersive fieldwork was conducted from 2005 to 2011. "Feminist ethnography is based on an acknowledgement of power relations, a desire to let silenced voices speak, intersubjectivity between researcher and participants, and, perhaps, most crucially, reflexivity" (p. 25). As a white, middle-class, American university professor and communication researcher, Wallis is reflexive about her privileged position compared with migrant women. On the other hand, she acknowledges migrant women's expertise and knowledge.

Wallis first historicizes the political, economic, social, and cultural context in post-Mao China when the *hukou* policy separated rural areas from urban ones and created a hierarchical distinction between city residents and countryside peasants. The *hukou* policy forbade rural people to settle in urban areas. Since the late 1970s, city expansions and the *hukou* policy reform have appealed to numbers of rural migrants flooding into urban areas, even though rural migrants suffer from bias and marginalization in cities. Female migrants are usually young, single, poor, unskilled, and less educated, and they have to take low-paid and low-skilled jobs without any benefits or welfare. The term *dagongmei* (little working sister) connotes a demeaning identity for young female migrant workers. *Suzhi* discourse, a form of neoliberal governmentality over human subjects that is used to discipline its citizens, first appeared in government propaganda to promote a one-child policy and now emphasizes one's bodily, moral, and educational qualities. China's booming market economy has transformed consumerism into a dominant ideology through neoliberal principles benefiting elites and the middle class, yet that market economy further marginalizes rural people and migrant workers.

Following a discussion of China's reform, Wallis explores the development of telecommunications in the era since 1992 when the integration of fixed and mobile telephony entered people's daily lives. Due to the Chinese government's continuing restructuring of the telecommunication infrastructure, cell phone usage increased dramatically to 4.6 billion subscriptions by the end of 2009. The distinct attribute of mobile phone usage, as

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## IMMOBILE MOBILITY

well as the uneven development of the telecommunication system, manifests the social and informational stratification in China. For example, while global-brand smartphones are popular among elites and the middle class, migrant workers and lower and working classes can afford only domestic-brands or copycat phones. The book's following chapters elucidate how young female migrant workers engage with mobile phones and its sociopolitical implications.

Chapter 2 addresses how young female migrant workers use cell phones in everyday life and how that technology influences their self-formations in the city. Wallis uses modernity as a frame to unpack the discursive construction of urban-rural binary, particularly through technological consumption, which constitutes China's modern development. Labor exploitation in China's booming market economy is often concealed by discourses that frame migration as enabling rural women to become modern. Legitimizing modernity encompasses gendered power relations and designates a way of being and an imagined life. Young migrant women's narratives about crafting a self that conforms to modernity reveals the "cultural discourses, structures and modes of knowledge that produce dominant understandings of how we should conduct ourselves" (p. 71). The consumption of mobile phones, as well as make-up and clothes, are material and symbolic practices for migrant women's self-transformation in the city. Although multiple logics offer certain means of surpassing limited material conditions, they also reinforce unbalanced distribution and unequal power relations. Structural and systematic inequalities embedded in the country's economic development marginalize migrant women and constrain their agency practices.

Mobile phones are primary tools for young migrant women to build and maintain their social networks and to cultivate close relationships. In chapter 3, Wallis discusses the affective dimension of mobile technologies use and relates it to the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, the networks of relations that derive from either shared identity or kinship relationships in China. Different from the Western bourgeois category of relationships, *guanxi* is a unity of instrumentality and affection. The sense of self in China is relationally oriented, which means that people form connections "either through a shared relational category or through an intermediary" (p. 94). Young migrant women use mobile phones not only to maintain ties with family and friends back in rural villages but also to forge new social relationships in the city. Mobile phones help these women, to some extent, overcome spatial and temporal constraints to have a greater agency and promote self-development. For example, "immobile mobility" becomes a virtual means of passing through busy work schedules, long distances, and sheltered living situations so as to sustain an emotional well-being in their social networks. However, Wallis further argues that the positionality of young migrant women, constituted by the intersections of gender, class, age, and place of origin, situates them at a disadvantage within sociocultural networks. Technomobility cannot equate with social mobility; development of technologies cannot guarantee solutions for social problems.

Chapter 4 analyzes how camera phones become a means of self-representation and self-governance. Young migrant women's imaging practices by camera phones represent and construct a sense of self and empower them. For example, migrant women take pictures of friends and families, as well as immediate surroundings, to preserve memories and maintain relational networks. With images of certain material goods stored in camera phones, these women enter desired realms with pleasure, fantasy, and ability to transverse the limitation of their lives. Yet migrant women's self-imaging practices also embody forms of self-surveillance and self-fashioning, which are governed by dominant ideologies of modernity and femininity. "Migrant women use camera phones to articulate desires, aesthetics and aspirations that ultimately are about the construction of self and imagining this self in a different world" (p. 142).

The next chapter maps mobile phone assemblage of young migrant women into the labor sphere. Gendered, classed, aged, and placed hierarchies and stratifications, along with disciplinary power and governmentality, situate young migrant women as constrained working subjects. The marketization in China creates a masculine commercial culture that sets appearance requirements for female service workers to appeal to male customers. Training and rules at work cultivate an enterprising self, but managerial styles of governing toward young migrant women often exercise a patriarchal mode of discipline. Job seeking stories reveal how migrant women adopt mobile phones to find jobs through established networks based on *guanxi*, but the practice is still stratified and limited. Given the structural and institutionalized constraint, migrant

women can use mobile phones as symbolic tools to resist unequal power relations and to negotiate with their employers' control in and out of work places. Migrant women engage in the symbolic protest by unauthorized possession of mobile phones at work. This tactic is also a means of developing a sense of self.

Wallis' long-term ethnographic study offers a thorough exploration of young migrant women's mobile phone assemblage in the context of China's transformation through urbanization and marketization and the ever-expanding diffusion of mobile technologies worldwide. The author analyzes the mutual constitution of technology and subjectivity in power relations that rural young migrants face in their everyday lives. Her historical and contextualized approach denies the grand narrative that often ignores personal dimensions and individual agency of marginalized groups. Narratives from young migrant women articulate themselves into the discursive construction of political, economic, and sociocultural relations and envisage their individual agency to provide opportunities for collective empowerment.

*Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones* is a significant work that contributes to the understanding of working and to the lives of young migrant women. Wallis' book also adds to the literature of feminist ICT studies of marginalized populations in transnational contexts and draws scholarly attention to tensions and negotiations between societal development and disadvantaged groups in contemporary China. ■

**Siyuan Yin**, PhD Student, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Department of Communication.  
yinsiyuan117@gmail.com

