

*Techno-Mobility and Translocal Migration:
Mobile Phone Use among Female Migrant Workers in Beijing*

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In China over the last few decades, as the forces set in motion by the reforms of the late seventies and early eighties have taken hold, rural-to-urban migrant workers have become a permanent fixture in China's cities. As a result, much scholarly inquiry has examined their motivations for migrating, their location in China's global economy, and the way they have upset previously taken-for-granted structural and socio-cultural aspects of Chinese life.¹ On a more micro-level and in the case of female migrants in particular, recent research has sought to delimit their role as active agents in their migration decisions, job selections, and personal lives.² This rich body of work has shown how migrant women in China's cities negotiate complex discourses and contradictory desires as they stake out their own path within the disjunctures and dislocations that comprise post-socialist China. However, one aspect of migrant women's lives that has remained relatively unexamined is their use of new communication technologies, such as the Internet and mobile phones, despite the fact that the scale of migration within China is perhaps matched only by its rapid growth in telecommunications infrastructure. In the few studies that have examined mobile phone use among migrant workers in China's southern factories, scholars have noted the increasing importance of such devices in maintaining social networks and signifying status, yet little attention has been paid to the intersection of mobile phone use, gender, and agency.³

This paper attempts to intervene in this gap by drawing from the results of a larger research project that examined how young male and female migrant workers in Beijing are using new communication technologies, such as the Internet and especially mobile phones, to negotiate their identity and agency in the urban environment. It also hopes to fill a glaring omission in the proliferation of studies in recent years on how mobile phones and other wireless devices have become part of youth culture and identity. While such research has found certain similarities in usage, appropriation, and discursive construction of mobile phones in cultures as

diverse as Norway, Japan, and the United Kingdom, the subjects of these studies have been primarily educated, relatively affluent, urban teenagers and college students in developed countries. Scant attention has been paid to uses by their more economically or socially marginalized peers, and/or those not operating within familiar modes of parental and school organization and control.⁴

More specifically, the research presented here focuses on how young, female rural-to-urban migrants employed in the low-level service sector in Beijing are using mobile phones for both practical and symbolic reasons. The findings are based on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing, first begun in the summer of 2005 and primarily carried out from September 2006 to June 2007. All in all, I conducted over 100 interviews with young female rural-to-urban migrants (16 to 27 years old) employed primarily as vendors in marketplaces, waitresses in restaurants, and assistants in hair salons. Many of these interviews involved multiple sessions and were supplemented by extensive participant observation at their places of work and residence as well as a set of 9 technology diaries where participants were asked to document their mobile phone and Internet use for four days over a one-week period. Another part of my project involved a group of 32 young women recruited by the Women's Federation from remote regions of China and enrolled in a three-month computer training course at the Practical Skills Training Center for Rural Women, a school overseen by the Beijing Cultural Development Center (also the umbrella organization of the Migrant Women's Club). I was able to interact with all of these women from the time of their arrival at the school through their graduation and job placement, and to follow up multiple times with about half of them as they became "*dagongmei*", or "working little sisters," in Beijing, and, in almost all cases, purchased their first mobile phone.⁵

In my research, I was concerned with young migrant women's meaning making practices and agency in relation to new communication technologies, and how economic, social, cultural, and structural forces enable and constrain such usage. Female migrants face marginalization and discrimination due to both their rural background and gender status, yet it is equally true that their own mobility and the recent loosening of certain social structures and strictures allows them greater opportunities for personal agency and autonomy, however constrained. In my study I sought to understand how the growing availability of new communication technologies potentially enables these women, who are ostensibly on the losing side of the so-called "digital divide" – due to limited literacy, financial resources, and technical expertise – to use the tools they have at hand and employ certain tactics (to use de Certeau's term) to participate, even if in a limited manner, in China's communications revolution. At the same time, I acknowledge that while such devices potentially open up new space for independence from traditional patriarchal structures, they at the same time can potentially preserve, or even strengthen, these same structures. Thus, in taking a cultural approach in examining uses of technology, I pay attention to issues of power and discourse in shaping the actual context and possibilities of material practices. I should also state at the outset that such findings are preliminary and constitute only a small portion of the data gathered.

In the remainder of this paper, I will first lay the groundwork for my study by briefly discussing the growth of mobile phone subscriptions in China in recent years as well as some of the particularities of Chinese mobile phone use. I will then elaborate on three themes that emerged in my research among the women in my study: how mobile phone usage is implicated in migrant women's notions of urban modernity, how the cell phone has become embedded in their social world, and how this small device works both to constrain and enable individual agency.⁶

The Network Society and China's Telecommunications Revolution

The processes of global capital, labor migration, communication technology diffusion, and changing forms of identity and identification are encapsulated in what Manuel Castells has called a “new form of society, the network society.”⁷ It has changed our conception of time and space and has led to new forms of work and social organization. It has also ushered in a world that is becoming increasingly characterized by, and constituted within, networks of communication and the thorough integration of new communication technologies into peoples’ everyday lives. In China, the expansion of telecommunications such as the Internet – from nearly 80 million users in 2003 to an estimated 150 million currently⁸ – and particularly mobile phones has changed everyday communication patterns, especially in urban areas. The rapid growth of mobile phone ownership has been particularly profound: in 1999, China had 14.9 million mobile phone subscribers; by 2004 this number had grown to nearly 188 million and it had more than doubled by 2006.⁹ The nation currently leads the world in mobile phone users, and the figure is expected to hit 520 million by the end of this year.¹⁰

Mobile phones (*shouji*) have now become a personal necessity for a vast majority of China’s city residents. Cell phones seem to be everywhere, and seem to be used everywhere. While living in Beijing and traveling to other parts of China, I noticed that users rarely let their phone go unanswered, whether they are in an important meeting with a superior, watching a movie in a theater, or dining in a quiet restaurant. Loud mobile phone conversations on busses and subways are commonplace, only slightly less ubiquitous than the mobile phone shops that line the streets of Beijing’s upscale shopping districts and the second-hand mobile phone markets found near migrant enclaves. Everywhere around the city billboards display highly sexualized images of Chinese women with mobile phones as

necessary fashion accoutrements or trendy youth with a mobile as the ultimate signifier of urban cool. Radio and television shows, Internet portals, and advertising companies all vie for attention on and through individuals' mobile phones, and for those who don't have the money to promote their services by such legitimate means, spray painting one's mobile number on walls or sidewalks has become a new kind of guerrilla advertising.

On the surface, one could say that Beijing is a networked, mobile-saturated city. However, in Castells' articulation of the network society there exists what he calls the "double logic of inclusion and exclusion" in "networks of production, consumption, communication, and power."¹¹ While not the same as the digital divide, clearly those at the exclusionary margins of this networked society are likely to have an impoverished or nonexistent communication technology environment. They also fall into what Castells calls "generic labor," meaning labor that is flexible, disposable, unskilled, and, not surprisingly, or perhaps therefore, increasingly, feminized.¹²

At this broad level of analysis, China's migrants – both male and female – would all be categorized as left out of the networks that "matter" in global capital's tangled system of power and value. Yet this in no way implies that their engagement with the new communication technologies so constitutive of the network society is insignificant. Certainly, communication technologies, however limited, have served a crucial function in helping migrants in China in previous decades to find work, connect with home, and expand their life opportunities. Formerly, pagers, communal phones in work dormitories, and public "call bars" were the primary means through which mediated communication for most of China's migrant population took place. However, increasingly the mobile phone is the communication tool *de rigueur* for what Cartier, Castells and Qiu have termed the "information have-less," which they define as a "social, economic, and political category"

that includes China's migrant workers, who tend to rely on less expensive forms of new communication technologies.¹³ While the term the "information have-less" is useful in discarding the binary of the "haves" and "have-nots" that usually enters discussions of the digital divide, it does not illuminate what these "have-less" actually do with the technology they possess and what it signifies in their lives.

Migrant Women, Mobile Phones and Modernity

When I first began to lay the groundwork for this project in 2005, many China scholars I knew – both Chinese and western – reacted with puzzlement, assuming that migrant women were either too poor, too illiterate, and/or too busy to have a mobile phone. Certainly by urban standards the women in my study were poor, most of them had only a middle school education, and they often worked excruciatingly long hours. Nevertheless, they are not completely left out of China's communication revolution. Apart from the group of young women brought in from extremely impoverished areas to attend the Practical Skills Training Center and four other women, *every* migrant woman (and all the migrant men) I spoke with – no matter their salary, occupation, or education – had a mobile phone.

To see how significant it was in their lives, we can begin with simple economics. Most of the women in my study earned an average of 800 – 1,000 yuan/month (approximately \$100 to \$130), including overtime, and spent the equivalent of one month's salary or more on their phone, although cheaper models were available.¹⁴ Even with those whose father, uncle, or older sibling had supplied them with a hand-me-down handset, the first big urban purchase of every migrant I spoke with was a cell phone. Time after time, my informants could recite the date, time, and place of the purchase, who had accompanied them, the price, how long it took for them to save up enough money, and their feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment at having joined the mobile masses. Beyond new clothes, a television, or even a precious train ticket home

after months of being away, a mobile phone was, as one of my informants put it, “the first, most expensive, important, gift to myself, ever.”

Some women invested in more costly phones with camera and mp3 functions, some purchased more expensive foreign brands, such as a Nokia or Motorola, but most bought cheaper Chinese models or even second-hand phones that allowed for simple voice calls and texting. In fact, there often appeared to be a trade-off between either purchasing a Chinese model with a camera and an mp3, or a more prestigious foreign model without such extra functions. Regardless of the brand, equally important to the actual functions on their phone was its appearance: it had to look pretty, and some women expressed embarrassment at having a phone that was too big or old, or regret at having purchased one that was later deemed “too ugly.” Many women had decorated their phones with stickers, “jewelry,” special covers, or, in a few cases, rhinestones.

Perhaps their concern about the appearance of their phones is not really so surprising, since in other studies mobile phones have been found to be important among young people in the presentation of the self, as a part of the self, and as status symbols.¹⁵ Katz and Sugiyama have called a cell phone “a miniature aesthetic statement about its owner.”¹⁶ Among China’s urban youth, these are all now a given, and as can be discerned from the above, this discursive construction also often came across in my interviews. But I believe that the significance of a mobile phone for the women in my study goes beyond the realm of youth cultural capital and in-group/out-group politics. As one young woman told me, “If you live in the city and you don’t have a mobile phone, others look down on you.” Other women echoed such sentiments – a phone was part of being “modern,” “developed,” or not “left behind,” and, along with new clothing and make-up, was something that set them apart from their peers still at home in the countryside.

This dual symbolism associated with mobile phone ownership by young female migrants, I would argue, is a result of how the discourses surrounding both China's development and the development of rural women are intertwined. In the Chinese media and in the everyday speech of urbanites, female migrants are often portrayed as passive, backward, naïve, and of general "low quality." They are positioned in such gendered discourses within the context of China's socio-cultural traditions, and they also exemplify the connection made by Chandra Mohanty between gender and globalization.¹⁷ Currently, China's modernization is synonymous with the expansion of the market economy; however, the exploitative labor practices this has entailed have been erased through a discourse in which migration is framed as providing an opportunity for rural women to "become modern" and to benefit, not only financially, but also by "seeing the world" or "gaining some skills." Thus, the ideology of China's quest for development is linked to the ideological and practical goal of "raising the quality" of rural women.

Yet, migrant women are not just "duped" into consenting to exploitative work that promises somehow to improve them; they comply because they feel they can actually gain something. At the same time, they invariably embrace certain consumer practices as a conscious way to shed their "rural essence", as one of my informants termed it. Thus, for them, a mobile phone articulates not only youth identity but also a hybrid rural/urban identity, helping to establish their position, however, ambiguous, in the city. In short, along with dressing more fashionably, reducing their accent, and all of the other disciplines designed to reform their rural bodies, it is part of their "becoming modern." On the one hand, this could be interpreted as young migrant women merely buying into the false allures of consumption, whereby consumer goods hold an elusive promise of suturing them seamlessly into urban life and masking their alterity. I argue that, on the other hand, in owning a mobile phone they are engaged in an act of

agency through controlling their personal resources, enhancing their own sense of self worth, and using a device that brings myriad pleasures, including social contact and entertainment.

It is not just the mobile phone itself, however, that is a metonym for urban modernity, but a set of practices and competencies as well. Manipulating a cell phone takes literacy skills, technical abilities, and knowledge of proper phone etiquette. These first two are especially important since the majority of mobile phone communication in China (and not just among migrant workers) takes place through text messaging. For women with limited education, this can present challenges and in certain cases serve to reify their marginalized status. We already know from numerous examples that technology is never neutral and works as a form of knowledge and power,¹⁸ and this became apparent in my research in several instances. Some women I interviewed expressed anxiety about not knowing how to properly respond to a message. Others were ridiculed by their peers when they didn't understand a message or replied too slowly; in fact, I witnessed such derision on more than a few occasions, and was also the subject of needling when I was too slow to "get" a joke sent via SMS. At the same time, migrant women embrace a variety of tactics to ensure their continued participation in this "mobile modernity" and resist marginalization. For some, this might mean making more voice calls or relying on the reading and input skills of friends and colleagues. There is also heavy usage of pre-written messages, which can be found in inexpensive books available in kiosks throughout the city or downloaded from the Internet, though invariably the women in my study received these messages from friends and then forwarded them.¹⁹ One of my informants stated, "The majority of the messages I send are pre-written. Why not? It's easy and convenient, and they can express what I want to say." In essence, with such tactics migrant women are "making do" within the circumstances that delimit the possibilities in their lives.²⁰

“Immobile Mobility”: Mobile Phones and the Social World of Migrant Women

Social capital, roughly defined as the number or quality of a person’s social relations, has been strongly connected to mobile phone use, which is said to nurture social ties and reinforce already existing social networks.²¹ To begin to understand the role of the mobile phone in migrant women’s sociality, a good starting point is to examine the contents of their phone. For most of the women in my study, their mobile phone was a clear reflection of their social world, which tends to be very small, for a number of reasons. They work extremely long hours (often 12 or 14 hours a day), some without ever having a day off and others with just one or two days off per month. Work schedules are frequently extended by the constant pressure to work overtime, or, in the case of several of the women I knew that worked at hair salons, to participate in trainings or “teamwork” sessions. Rare time off is usually spent attending to such basics as doing laundry, catching up on sleep, or going to the market. Friends are usually coworkers who don’t have the same day off, and many migrant women are reluctant to venture out of their local neighborhood alone. Contributing to this small social world is the fact that most of the women in my study tended to live in tiny apartments or dormitories with as many as 18 to a room, supplied by their employer and with strict curfews, or with a relative, often an uncle or older sibling who serve as surrogate parents. Their circumscribed place, dictated by work and home, is compounded by spatial and discursive power relations that construct the city as a dangerous, foreign place due to their position as women and outsiders, marked by their accent, their build, and their mannerisms.

For the most part, I did not find that a mobile phone was helping them to *expand* their social networks or social capital, except in the case of dating, which will be discussed in the next section. The names in their phone address books were usually of current and former coworkers, former classmates still at home or out laboring in other parts of China, and a few

family members. Yet, a mobile phone was key to *enriching* their social relationships. Many friendships were maintained strictly through a mobile phone; that is, contrary to the results of other mobile phone studies, I did not find that the phone was used mostly as a “supportive communication technology”²² for relationships that are primarily sustained through face-to-face contact. It was instead what I call an “expansive communication tool,” used not only for maintaining ties with friends who are now spread all over China but also with those who, although in the same city, are nonetheless geographically unreachable.

In the same way, since migrant women have so little time off, the mobile phone was not used so much for “micro-coordination,” the term Ling and Yttri coined for the “nuanced, instrumental coordination” that allows for more flexible time scheduling and transportation arrangements, but rather for what they call “hyper-coordination,” or the way mobile phones are used “for emotional and social communication,” particularly through chatting and sending short text messages.²³ The mobile phone thus afforded the migrant women in my study a form of “immobile mobility,” a virtual means of traversing the boundaries of long work schedules, cloistered living situations, and far distances in order sustain their social networks.

Such immobile mobility and migrant women’s relatively contained social world was also reflected in the pictures snapped and stored in their phones, which were often of the following: themselves, usually in glamorous poses, colleagues, and family members. As noted by Mimi Ito, who did some of the first research on camera phones, in contrast to conventional cameras that are most often used to preserve special memories, mobile phone pictures are usually of the ordinary or mundane.²⁴ However, very few of the migrant women that I knew had a conventional camera. Therefore, it is doubtful we can make the same distinction as Ito when reflecting on the pictures they took with their mobile phone. Rare trips home or to a park with a

friend were also captured in the phone, but the overwhelming ordinariness displayed in their pictures captured the ordinariness of their lives.

Still, there was something else that I noticed – that I came across numerous times – and this was *pictures of pictures* that were stored in the phone. For example, a picture of a famous historic site or of natural beauty such as a field of lilies. In essence, the phone was used to make postcards of the extraordinary, not as a treasured memory of a real encounter or journey, but to virtually and vicariously experience a place out of reach. There were also pictures of the designer watches sold daily but never to be bought or of a favorite actor on the TV screen, captured in this manner since downloading from the Internet was either technically or economically unfeasible. Many women showed me such pictures without embarrassment but instead with pride in their ability to circumvent the limitations of their own lives. For example, on one occasion a friend had me look at a photo she had stored in her phone of Japanese cherry blossoms. When I asked her with surprise where she had gone to be able to take such a picture, she laughed, told me it was a picture of a picture, and then said with delight, “You couldn’t tell, could you?” And the fact was, I couldn’t.

Surely it is possible to view such an engagement with simulacrum with an element of pathos – the photos then are a material and psychological mirror image of the pitiful migrant woman and her tiny social world. Or, following Bourdieu, we may simply see this practice as representative of a migrant woman’s habitus – a reflection of her lifestyle, tastes, class, and education.²⁵ And certainly the pictures of pictures are a personal and portable aesthetic, captured and displayed in one of the few spaces that a migrant woman can actually call her own. On the other hand, I would argue that they also demonstrate young migrant women’s ability to imagine a world beyond their current situation, and as such, new possibilities for transcending spatial and economic limitations, certainly a first step in individual agency. This clearly was the case

with a young hair stylist I knew in Beijing. She could not afford a camera so she used her mobile phone to take pictures of styles that she liked that she saw in magazines. She also used her phone to archive her own haircuts that she had done that she was particularly proud of, and she was keeping these as a record of her own development as a stylist and as a sort of virtual resume to secure a better job in the future. The same woman who showed me the picture of the cherry blossoms had also begun snapping photos of some of the fashions that she sold in her stall as part of her preparation for eventually opening up her own clothing boutique back home. These illustrations attest to the creativity used by migrant women in deploying their mobile phones to expand the realm of possibility in their lives.

Mobile Phones and Migrant Women's Agency

Any form of new technology should never be construed as ushering in sweeping changes that radically alter the structural and material conditions that serve both to enable and constrain possibilities for personal or societal change. In the previous section I touched upon how the mobile phone is used by migrant women for imagining new and potentially better circumstances for their lives. Here I will expand on this theme by elaborating how mobile phones are implicated in migrant women's acts of individual agency, both at work and in their personal lives.

Regulated drudgery and mobile phone resistance

As mentioned earlier, the jobs available to the majority of migrant women entail long hours, and, in some cases, what I call "regulated drudgery." For example, in the larger marketplaces that cater to foreign tourists spread throughout the city, the employees, mostly young migrant women, are required to stand for hours on end, to maintain an erect posture (crossing arms is forbidden), and to say the "right" words to potential customers, as bosses stand to the side, making sure they adhere to this disciplinary regime. As one woman remarked, "We

do all the work; the boss just hangs around reading the newspaper and drinking tea, watching to make sure we haggle with customers and don't steal any money.” Control and manipulation by bosses over their workers has been a prominent feature in ethnographic accounts of migrant women. For example, in her research on a Chinese audio equipment factory, Ching Kwan Lee described a “localistic, despotic factory regime” with a highly gendered organizational chain of command, where male managers exercised patriarchal control over their female employees.²⁶ Similarly, Pun Ngai’s portrayal of management’s disciplinary regime over the bodies of female workers – how the women are taught to move in a mechanized manner, how they are positioned spatially on the line, how they follow a rigid timetable and are subjected to the Panoptic “electronic eye” – is a virtual rewriting of Foucault’s “Docile Bodies” in *Discipline and Punish*, albeit set in a Chinese electronics factory.²⁷ Though perhaps not as rigidly controlled as the workers described by Pun and Ching, all of the women in my study – whether they worked as vendors, waitresses, or salon girls – had nonetheless undergone numerous types of training and had to endure various forms of psychological control to ensure that they were docile, compliant bodies in the workplace. On several occasions I witnessed women being reprimanded for the slightest of offenses, such as being too slow to give a customer change.

The marketplaces in particular often presented an atmosphere of constant surveillance. Thus, it is no wonder that in these locations a mobile phone became a small tool of resistance to reclaim space and time. As Doreen Massey reminds us, because the “geometry of social/power relations” is always shifting, structures of dominance are also never completely fixed.²⁸ Thus, I often witnessed that when a boss was momentarily away or preoccupied, one of the first things many women did was check their phones. As one woman told me, “I can’t use my phone when my boss is around, even when there are no customers, but when he’s not looking I still will send or read messages.” Mobile phones, particularly those equipped with games or music, also

become a means for ignoring customers or the banter of other colleagues. Beyond reclaiming space, the mobile is used for the most mundane of reasons – to relieve the sheer boredom of standing day in and day out in the same cramped stall doing the same repetitive job. Cell phones do not break down the regimens of disciplinary control and power that circulate in and through migrant women’s lives. Because of the very fluid nature of such power, however, they do become tools for migrant women to engage in their own tactics for exercising individual agency, no matter how constrained.²⁹

Still, I should stress that I am not attempting to imbue mobile phones with agentic qualities that will radically change the structural constraints faced by young migrant women. Many have internalized the boss’ gaze and are scared to use their phone even when unsupervised, lest they get caught and their phone confiscated. In some restaurants, employees are forbidden to bring their phones to work and if they are found with one, bosses will not only take it but also dock their pay. Furthermore, employers now have a tool to keep tabs on employees that they never had before. One woman I knew had a boss who constantly called her on her mobile phone late at night to accuse her of stealing clothes from the shop where she worked. She desperately wanted to quit but feared that time spent looking for a new job was money she couldn’t afford to lose. Another woman in my study was one of the few who said she would be relieved – it would “save her a lot of worry” – if she didn’t have a phone since her boss basically used it as a means of constantly paging her. Clearly, mobile phones, like other technologies, can reinforce existing asymmetrical power relations and create new modes of exploitation and control.³⁰

Mobile phones and intimate relationships

I will close by relating one more connection between mobile phones and migrant women’s individual autonomy or agency, and this is in the realm of dating and intimacy. As has been noted by many scholars, the phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration by young women has

troubled traditional Chinese notions regarding unmarried women's chastity and parental authority in marriage.³¹ Young rural women's sojourn to the city also means that they are likely to delay marriage. The result is that by the time they return home in their mid-to-late twenties they are considered old maids. Their urban experience also causes their values to change, and they often feel there is too big a gap between themselves and the young males who never left the village who are their potential marriage partners.³² Many of the women in my study expressed anxiety about this dilemma. It is safe to say that in the past most of them would have invariably returned home for marriage, often an arranged one.

However, in China, as in other parts of the world, the Internet and mobile phones are changing this dramatically. I have already elaborated on the small social circle occupied by most migrant women. Outside of colleagues or former classmates, their possibilities for meeting a significant other are severely limited. Now, just as in other parts of the world, some meet future boyfriends online, but this was not common in my study. Some use their mobile phone to place or respond to a classified ad in a magazine, something that would have been nearly impossible to do before due to their lack of a fixed-line phone and social norms governing what a "filial daughter" should and should not do. Very few acknowledged ever responding to a complete stranger who sent a flirtatious text message, as several of the informants in Raul Pertierra's research on mobile phones and intimacy in the Philippines did.³³ More often than not, when it came to dating relationships and mobile phones, what I observed was a mixing of traditional and technological.

For example, in some cases a woman might be "introduced" to a potential boyfriend through a friend passing along her mobile phone number. Sometimes an initial meeting is set up through an intermediary via a webcam at an Internet café. After a few meetings in this manner, if the new couple deemed each other suitable, due to the prohibitive costs of the Internet, all

future “dating” would take place via the mobile phone, with text messages sent throughout the day, and long conversations until late into the night. Often a face-to-face meeting might not occur for several weeks or even months, due to geographical distances or work schedules. One migrant woman I knew, Lily, had a friend who was getting married and had to return to her hometown in Sichuan province for some preparations. Because this friend had a “Little Smart” phone, a less expensive phone with limited mobility (it only worked in Beijing), she asked Lily if they could temporarily swap phones. In the meantime, this woman’s fiancé, who was in the army, had a buddy who had just bought his first mobile phone but complained that he had no one with whom he could exchange messages. The woman’s fiancé told him to contact her, maybe she could help. Of course, when he finally sent the message she was in Sichuan, and Lily received his message asking for help finding a friend. They started exchanging messages on a daily basis, then mailed letters and photos, and eventually started “dating,” solely through the mobile phone, until they met face to face five months later. They eventually became engaged.

My research yielded numerous stories like this one, and in each case when I asked these women if such relationships would have been possible without a mobile phone they invariably said it was unlikely. It is not, as one of my American friends remarked upon hearing this story, “just like Match.com” or some other online dating service. These women were not using new technology to cast a wide net in the hopes of finding a suitable mate. In each case, there was still an intermediary, just as in traditional Chinese culture. Relationships were maintained primarily through text messaging, with face-to-face meeting occurring long after the relationship had been solidified via the mobile phone. The transportable, personal nature of the cell phone made this possible for women who grew up without a landline and who usually only had access to a public phone (or no phone at all) in their living quarters in Beijing. Text messaging also allows them privacy perhaps heretofore impossible since they tend to live in communal spaces. It is not that a

mobile phone is a revolutionary item, sweeping in and changing their lives, *a la* technological determinism. It is allowing for heretofore desired but unrealizable freedom and autonomy in establishing and maintaining intimate relationships, and in the process is potentially undermining the parental authority that has determined marriages between Chinese rural young people for centuries.

Mobile Phones – Tools of Agency?

The mobile phone's continuous diffusion and its position in a specific socio-cultural milieu such as Beijing at the new millennium prompts further investigation into how it signifies and shapes transformations taking place at all levels of society, particularly among traditionally marginalized populations such as the women in this study. For young migrant women working in the low-level service sector in Beijing, the mobile phone has clearly become a new form of "technosocial tethering" in an often unstable and unfriendly urban environment.³⁴ It has become embedded in their formation of cosmopolitan modernity, it has become an expansive communication tool allowing for their "immobile mobility," and it facilitates individual acts of agency and autonomy in their work and personal lives. The cell phone clearly has enhanced their sense of community and connection to friends and intimate others.

Still, when I first embarked on this study, I had high hopes of finding new communication technologies like the mobile phone used by migrant women to better their lives materially; that is, to find better employment, increase their income, gain new knowledge, or organize collectively. Unfortunately, for the most part, this was not the case, for a number of reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper.³⁵ Does this mean mobile technologies are just frivolous toys with no significant outcomes? Is a mobile phone just another consumer item, the desire for which operates to subsume capitalism's extraction of migrant women's surplus labor while promising superficial transformative possibilities?³⁶ Does it reify class and gender differences,

or, in comparison to other new communication technologies, does its relatively inexpensive cost, widespread availability, personal nature, and ease of use offer democratizing possibilities? Is it a tool of subversive resistance or of resilient subordination? Perhaps these are not the appropriate questions to ask, since a technology can never be reduced to such simple either/or formulations. As Mimi Ito has noted, whether a mobile phone is a “socially conservative or transformative tool is determined by its status as a sociotechnical device embedded in specific social contexts and power geometries.”³⁷ In the same way, agency can never be construed as that which only leads to tangible material transformations, and empowerment is never only economic or political.³⁸ I would argue that for young migrant women in Beijing, the symbolic meaning of a mobile phone, the way it allows for expansive communication in the maintenance of social networks, and its use for personal agency and autonomy vis-à-vis authority figures such as parents and bosses are forms of practical and psychological empowerment that are equally important.

Endnotes

1. Huang Xiyi, "Divided Gender, Divided Women: State Policy and the Labor Market," in *Women of China: Economic and Social Transformation*, eds. Jackie West et al. (New York: Palgrave Publishers, 1999), 90-107; see Zhang and Song in the same volume; Dorothy Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

2. Arianne M. Gaetano and Tamara Jacka, eds., *On the Move: Women and Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Wang Feng, "Gendered Migration and the Migration of Genders in China," in *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China*, eds. Barbara Entwistle and Gail E. Henderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 231-242; Tan Shen, "Leaving Home and Coming Back: Experiences of Rural Migrant Women," in *Holding up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun, and Shirley Mow (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2004), 248-258. Zhang Li, "The Interplay of Gender, Space, and Work in China's Floating Population" in Entwistle and Henderson, 171-196.

3. Patrick Law and Yinni Peng, "The Use of Cellphones amongst Migrant Workers in Southern China." Paper presented at the International Conference on Mobile Communication and Social Change, Seoul, Korea (October 17-18, 2004); Carolyn Cartier and Jack Linchuan Qiu, "Networked Mobility in Urban China: Hukou, Working-Class ICTs and the Case of Sun Zhigang." Paper presented at the 57th annual International Communication Association Conference, San Francisco, California (May 24-28, 2007); Patrick Law, "Mobile Communication: Mobile Relationships, and the Mobility of Migrant Workers in Guangdong." Paper presented at the Mobile Communication and Asian

Modernities II Conference, Beijing, China (October 20-21, 2005); Angel Lin, "Mobile Cultures of Migrant Workers in Southern China: Literacies, Leisure and Gender Relations of the New Working Class." Paper presented at the Mobile Communication and Asian Modernities II Conference, Beijing, China (October 20-21, 2005).

4. See, for example, Mizuko Ito et al., *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); James Katz and Mark Aakhus, eds. *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Rich Ling, *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society* (Amsterdam: Morgan Kaufman Publishers, 2004). A notable exception is Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication* (Oxford: Berg, 2006).

5. I also conducted a survey among male and female migrants that yielded 275 responses, but the survey results are not included in this analysis.

6. I define agency as an ability to define one's goals and act on them.

7. Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (2nd ed.). (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 1.

8. Guo Liang, "Surveying the Internet Usage and Impact in 12 Chinese Cities," China Internet Project, 2005.

9. Cartier and Qiu, 13.

10. "Report: China's Cell Users Hit 600M," *Washington Post Online*, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/03/07/AR2007030701338.html>> (15 March 2007).

11. Manuel Castells, "Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint" in *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Manuel Castells (Northampton, MA: Edward Elger Publishers, 2004), 23.

12. Ibid., 26.

13 Carolyn Cartier, Manuel Castells, and Jack Linchuan Qiu, “The Information Have-Less: Inequality, Mobility, and Translocal Networks in Chinese Cities,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 40, no. 2 (2005): 9.

14. The inordinate amount of money that migrant laborers spend on their cell phones has also been noted by Law (2005; see also Yang Shan Hua and Zhu Wei Zhi, “*Shouji: Quanquihua Beijingxia de ‘Zhudong’ Xuanze—Zhusanjiao Diqu Nongmingong Shouji Xiaofei de Wenhua he Xintai de Jiedu* (Mobile Phone: ‘Selecting Their Own Initiative’ under the Background of Globalization),” *Jincheng Nongmingong: Xianzhuang, Qushi, Women Neng Zuo Xie Shenme* (Rural-Urban Migrants: Situations, Trends and What we can do), People’s University Institute for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2006. It should be noted that the subjects in the latter study were in a slightly higher socio-economic strata than the women in my study.

15. Kris Cohen and Nina Wakeford, “The Making of Mobility, The Making of Self,” (INCITE, University of Surrey in Collaboration with Sapient, June 2003)
[http://incite.surrey.ac.uk/KrisCohenHypermediaFiles/Mobility\(1\)2002/Outcomes/Document/s/making%20mob%20making%20self.pdf](http://incite.surrey.ac.uk/KrisCohenHypermediaFiles/Mobility(1)2002/Outcomes/Document/s/making%20mob%20making%20self.pdf) (25 October 2005); Jane Carroll et al., “A Field Study of Perceptions and Use of Mobile Telephones by 16 to 22 year olds,” *Journal of Information Technology Theory and Application* 4, no. 2 (2004): 49-60; Claire Lobet-Maris, “Mobile Phone Tribes: Youth and Social Identity, in *Mediating the Human Body: Technology, Communication, and Fashion*, eds. Leopoldina Fortunati et al. (Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 87-92.

16. James E. Katz and Satomi Sugiyama, “Mobile Phones as Fashion Statements: The Co-Creation of Mobile Communication’s Public Meaning,” 64,

<<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/ci/cmcs/publications/articles/mobile%20phones%20as%20fashion%20statements.pdf>> (25 September 2005).

17. C. Cindy Fan, "Migration and Gender in China," in *China Review 2000*, eds. Chung-ming Lau and Jianfa Shen (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000), 434-435; Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. (Duke University Press, 2003), 142.

18. Cynthia Coburn, "The Circuit of Technology: Gender, Identity and Power," in *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, eds. Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch (London: Routledge, 1992), 32-47.

19. According to Cartier, Castells and Qiu (2005), a small cottage industry has emerged for the writing of jokes and greetings to be sent via SMS. Angel Lin has analyzed some of the text messages found in manuals designed for migrant workers in "Romance and Sexual Ideologies in SMS Manuals Circulating Among Migrant Workers in Southern China." Paper presented at the 2005 Mobile Communication and Asian Modernities Conference, Hong Kong (6 – 7 June 2005).

20. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. Steven Rendall) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 35.

21. Ito (2005); Ling (2004); Truls Erik Johnsen, "The Social Context of the Mobile Phone Use of Norwegian Teens," in *Machines that Become Us: The Social Context of Personal Communication Technology*, ed. James E. Katz (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 161-169.

22. Kyongwon Yoon. "Retraditionalizing the Mobile: Young People's Sociality and Mobile Phone Use in Seoul, Korea," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6, no. 33 (2003): 327-343.

23. Rich Ling and Birgitte Yttri, "Hyper-coordination via Mobile Phones in Norway," in *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, eds. James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 140.

24. Mimi Ito, "Mobile phones, Japanese Youth, and the Re-placement of Social Contact." Paper presented at the Front stage - Back stage: Mobile Communication and the Renegotiation of the Public Sphere Conference, Grimstad, Norway (June 2003).

25. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (trans. Richard Nice) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

26. Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

27. Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Hong Kong: Duke University Press, 2005).

28. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 4.

29. Pun Ngai noted similar types of agency in her study, such as the women's intentional slowing down of the production line or blaring loud pop music on a radio in defiance of company rules.

30. Jack Linchuan Qiu, "The Wireless Leash: Mobile Messaging Service as a Means of Control." Paper presented at the Communication Technology and Social Policy in the Digital Age: Expanding Access, Redefining Control Conference, Palm Springs, California (March 9-11, 2006).

31. Arianne M. Gaetano, "Filial Daughters, Modern Women: Migrant Domestic Workers in Post-Mao Beijing," in Gaetano and Jacka, 2004, 41-79; C. Cindy Fan, "Out to

the City and Back to the Village: The Experiences and Contributions of Rural Women Migrating from Sichuan and Anhui,” in Gaetano and Jacka, 2004, 177-206.

32. Louise Beynon, “Dilemmas of the Heart: Rural Working Women and their Hopes for the Future,” in Gaetano and Jacka, 2004, 131-150; Luo Binbin et al. “The Migration Experience of Young Women from Four Counties in Sichuan and Anhui,” in Gaetano and Jacka, 2004, 207-242.

33. Raul Pertierra, “Mobile Phones, Identity and Discursive Intimacy,” *Human Technology*, 1, no.1, (2005): 23-44.

34. I borrow this term from Ito, 2005.

35. Horst and Miller reached the same conclusion in their study of low-income Jamaicans and mobile phone use, 103. It should be noted that in my interviews, entrepreneurial women (those who owned their own businesses) said mobile phones did help increase their income, yet they constituted a small percentage of the women in my study.

36. Pun Ngai, “Subsumption or Consumption? The Phantom of Consumer Revolution in ‘Globalizing’ China,” *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2003): 469-492.

37. Ito, 2003, 13.

38. I am using Nelly Stromquist’s definition of empowerment, where cognitive empowerment involves women’s understanding the causes of their subordination and their legal rights as well as the realization that they may need to make choices that “go against cultural or social expectations,” including “destroying beliefs that structure powerful gender ideologies” (14); psychological empowerment entails women believing that they can “act at personal and societal levels to improve their condition” and escape from “learned helplessness” (14); economic empowerment includes access to work as a means of increasing autonomy in general, despite a potential double burden; and political

empowerment is the ability to analyze in a political manner one's situation and mobilize collectively for social change (15). Nelly Stromquist, "The Theoretical and Practical Bases for Empowerment," in *Women, Education, and Empowerment*, ed. Carolyn Mendel-Anonuevo (Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education, 1993), 13-22.