

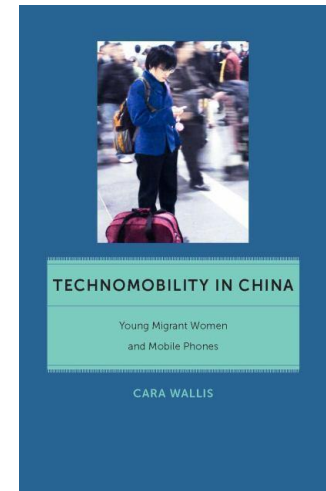
Cara Wallis, **Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013 263 pp., \$45 (hardcover).

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Cara Wallis' book, **Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones**, is largely a very impressive work and one that will have considerable value outside the academic fields for which it is nominally intended. The most obvious strength of the book lies in its depiction—through nuanced description and adroit selection of interview excerpts—of the world of female migrant workers in China. It is an object lesson for researchers in how to conduct fieldwork effectively and report on it well, creating research outcomes that are theoretically well-informed, rigorous, nuanced, and that ultimately let the subjects of research speak for themselves. The overall picture that readers get goes beyond both purely journalistic accounts (Chang, 2008) and more theoretical ones (Ngai, 2005), even though those works attempted a broader analysis of the migrant labor market in China and did not just concentrate on communication.



From its opening to its conclusion, this book purports to be about “mobility.” Though this framing is stimulating and challenging for the reader, it is also occasionally puzzling. *Technomobility in China* depicts a situation where geographic mobility is an essential part of the lives of the individuals it discusses (“mobile bodies”) and in which nominally “mobile” phones are used (“mobile technologies”), but also one where the existence of other forms of mobility—for example, shifts in worldviews, social and economic mobility, or self-cultivation—is considerably more questionable. Thus, the idea of “immobile mobility,” developed at various points in the book, might be framed more simply as mere social immobility, which is experienced in the face of a constantly and geographically shifting society.

The case study in the book concerns *dagongmei* (“working little sisters”)—young women from rural China who move to large cities to take on menial customer service jobs in an ambiguous search for economic and social advancement: The idea of the quest for “urban modernity” recurs throughout the book. As part of her doctoral research, Wallis devoted considerable time to interviewing and forming close relationships with many of these workers, mostly in Beijing but also in other places across China as well. Well-selected and invariably interesting and engaging excerpts from these interviews permeate the book.

From the first chapter onward, the world of *dagongmei* is contextualized and described effectively. The reader comes to understand their everyday lives, the types of jobs they perform, and their practical and emotional ups and downs. We come to understand how they view themselves, how they are viewed by others, how they deal with problems, and how they fit into the current urban Chinese economic milieu—that is, their orientation within the “market society,” which is the conceptual focal point of the opening chapter. This marketization of society is one of “two profound transformations” described by

Wallis. The other is the advent of the cheap and ubiquitous mobile phone, which has come to play an unquestionably crucial role in practically every aspect of the life of *dagongmei*. Hence, the book asks, in a number of implicit and explicit ways, how what is referred to as the mobile phone's "assemblage"—roughly, the use of the mobile phone and its "articulated elements," as well as the ideas and practices that surround its use—has affected the lives of *dagongmei*. In particular it considers how the use of mobile phones has increased their bargaining power in personal and economic relationships, their social mobility, and their ability to shape themselves in the urban context—the hypothesized "technomobility" of the book's title.

The book explores this question from various perspectives. Chapter 2 explores the role of the mobile phone in the construction of the self. It discusses the economic processes by which *dagongmei* obtain mobile phones and addresses the intensely important role of the phone in their understanding of themselves and of their place in a complex, confusing, and sometimes dangerous urban world. Chapter 3 moves from the self to the social network, considering how the use of phones places *dagongmei* in a social hierarchy and allows them to meet and communicate with others, in particular for maintaining links with their homes and even for matchmaking. Chapter 4 discusses the use of the built-in camera function of mobile phones and examines the various ways in which *dagongmei* create, use, and interpret visual images on their phones. Chapter 5 considers the place of mobile phones in the regime of labor regulation, for example, how disciplinary regimes relating to mobile phone use are set up and maintained by managers in an attempt to create "docility" in their workers and what role the phones play in labor disputes.

Whereas the empirical contribution of the book is excellent, its theoretical contribution is rather more diffuse. Individual sections of the *Technomobility in China* touch on many conceptual frameworks without necessarily making a strong contribution in any one particular area. The strategy is to set up or allude to multiple theoretical questions, which are not necessarily all answered coherently in terms of the case study. In other words, while the theoretical breadth of the book is impressive, it does not go into the depth that it could have on some topics. For example, the elaborate, theoretical set-up of Chapters 4 and 5—Chapter 4 provides an historical and conceptual background of the whole concept of photography, while Chapter 5 begins with what appears at first to be a dramatic and politically significant case of labor disputes—does not seem to bear any great conceptual fruit when juxtaposed with the empirical data provided. Chapter 4 ultimately concludes that the collection and viewing of digital images is important to *dagongmei*, whereas Chapter 5 concludes that, although mobile phones offer a hypothetical potential to increase the agency of migrant workers in labor disputes, this potential is not generally realized. Hence, the conclusions of these chapters, while valid and interesting in themselves, do not really answer or add to the implicit theoretical questions that their respective opening sections pose.

This is also true of the book's wider aims: While questions of a Foucauldian type—that is, relating to governmentality and the use of "technologies of the self"—are posed logically and lucidly in the opening section of the book, there is a sense that these questions are not fully answered in the conclusions. The same might also be said of the comparison of the "working class ICTs" (to use Jack Qiu's now familiar term) used by *dagongmei* with the digital world of the "information rich," both in China and across the world. While some time is spent emphasizing that there are differences between the resources and

techniques through which these two groups use mobile technologies, the book's intense focus on only *dagongmei* means that the reader must either speculate or look elsewhere to derive any substantive conclusion in this respect.

Hence, the really effective conceptual contributions of the book are perhaps not the ones which Wallis signposts the most heavily. The author often discusses "necessary convergence," a term that she coins to signify that the particular phone usage habits of *dagongmei* do not really arise by choice or by engagement with China's market society, but rather out of pragmatism and "making do" with whatever is available. The use of text messaging and QQ groups, which are available on cheap phones and prepaid data plans—rather than, say, engaging with Weibo, a medium which many writers would have the public believe is sweeping China from top to bottom—is used to demonstrate this. Wallis mentions the idea of necessary convergence quite a few times, but it is hard to imagine that it is especially new or unintuitive. The second contribution—a particularly important one that perhaps should have been highlighted even more—is an empirical justification of the idea that mobile technology has made no obvious difference to economic or social power relations in China. Physically, socially, and culturally, *dagongmei* are effectively in gated ghettos, even within large and complex cities. The advent of pervasive mobile technology does not mitigate this effect, but rather reinforces it. Migrant workers' existing links with their rural hometowns, their social and matrimonial networks, employer-employee relationships, and aesthetic worlds are all cemented, not subverted, by mobile technology. Wallis' interviews depict women who use the mobile phone primarily as a fetish object and status symbol within their peer group and secondly as a tool for maintaining rather than for transcending the social and economic situation in which they find themselves. Because the mobile phone can be rather costly, put social pressure on individuals, and be used for employee surveillance, the book does provoke the question of whether there is any substantial benefit to the use of the phone at all.¹

An overall reading of this book provides readers with a substantive understanding of the two sides of the world of *dagongmei*: its restrictive mundaneness and its potential for social mobility and self-actualization. Even though the restrictive side of their lives is normally more pervasive, the resilience and strategic flexibility and the characteristic "voice" of *dagongmei* also emerge. The book's depiction of *dagongmei* and the modern Chinese social economy seems instinctively true to life. Last, but not least, the book is intuitively structured and well-written. It is fluent, always engaging, and never unnecessarily abstruse: Both its ethnographic passages and its reflections on previous work and on theory are a pleasure to read. These factors, together with its theoretical breadth, ensure that *Technomobility in China* will become a valuable part of the canon in not only in Chinese studies but also in communication studies and cultural studies.

¹ I do not believe that Wallis is arguing, in a polemical way, for mobile technology as a benefit or detriment to migrant workers. Nonetheless her book, while normally very lucid, is rather opaque on this matter. While Vukovich's (2012) various apologia for Maoism (in his recent book) are far from being entirely plausible and reasonable, he makes one important point about the orientalist tendency in modern Chinese studies: Namely, that it is easy for Western students of China to interpret all social changes and tendencies in China to be a form of "becoming the same" as the West. Arguably, Wallis does not devote quite enough time to reflecting on the teleological aspects of her work.

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