Cara Wallis


‘My interest in this project began during a return visit to China in 2002, the same year Wu Huiying’s sister purchased her bronze-coloured Nokia phone’ (15).

Published as part of the New York University Press ‘Critical Cultural Communication’ series, Technomobility in China is an overhaul of Cara Wallis’ doctoral research about Chinese female migrant workers and their use of mobile phones, enriched by the author’s attention to the material details of everyday technologies. Curiously, although the word ‘technomobility’ is never explicitly defined in the text, its meaning emerges as the meeting point of the two main theoretical arguments developed by Wallis throughout the volume: the constitutive nature of technology, power, and subjectivity, and the different kinds of agency and mobility enabled by mobile phones.

Drawing on a dizzying breadth of literature, ranging from cultural studies to science and technology studies, and from technofeminist perspectives to theories of discourse and governmentality, Wallis pitches her ethnographic study of ‘the mobile phone as an assemblage made up of the articulation of myriad socio-techno practices’ (184) on the foreground of two ‘rapidly changing formations’ (8): neo-liberal and urbanizing post-reform China, and the global diffusion of mobile communications.

After a dense and extremely informative chapter on the socio-economic context of modern China, Wallis goes through her four academic hats — ethnographer, sociologist, STS scholar, and feminist labour researcher — as the reader is skilfully transported through hair salons, cramped housing, restaurants, and marketplaces. By following the slippery assemblage of techno-social practices, disciplinary discourses, and individual experiences articulated through mobile phones, the author illustrates the affective and social lives of mobile devices, traces the expansion of social networking through phonebooks, and reveals the role of low-resolution digital camera phone aesthetics in practices of self-fashioning and imagined consumption.

The author takes issue with determinist narratives of technology grounded in studies of privileged user populations by revealing how mobile phones enable different, situated kinds of mobility and convergence. Both concepts are weighed through a declared Foucauldian attitude towards technologies as sites of struggle and negotiation: immobile mobility, as ‘a socio-techno means of surpassing spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries’ (6) does not necessarily enable social mobility (117); similarly, the ‘necessary convergence’
emerging ‘when users are not equipped with an array of technological devices and thus must creatively converge uses within a single device’ (142) does not necessarily fit the trend of ‘selective convergence’ of technologies theorized by media scholars studying wealthy urban youth. In short, despite sleek marketing and enthusiastic scholarship, Wallis argues, communication technologies are never neutral, nor intrinsically empowering.

The choice of a target population of rural-to-urban migrant women labouring outside the benefits of work unit affiliation and struggling to integrate in China’s booming cities is a precise choice: while shifting the focus of media scholarship away from the relatively well-off global youth of digital natives, Wallis also seeks to reorient the attention of feminist scholarship away from the ‘trope of the young Asian female […] as an urban, sexy, tech-savvy consumer of new media’ (18).

Wallis’ engagement with feminist theories of technology, migration, and labour enables her to cut through appearances and reveal how rural women’s motivations for migrating go well beyond financial status and household strategies, and are instead linked to personal growth, the search for fulfilment, and ways of exercising agency and autonomy against patriarchal familial contexts and the drudgery of agricultural work. In explicit contrast with ‘several previous feminist critiques of technology’ (185), and with great respect and attention for the seemingly trivial techno-social practices of everyday life, the author stresses how migrant women in China are not necessarily passive subalterns under the sway of neoliberal techno-commercialism and its pre-packaged identities: ‘Young migrant women certainly participate in China’s “mobile revolution,” and this participation is important not only for their inclusion in sociality but also as a way for them to understand and affirm their gender identity’ (185).

In her critical and self-reflexive positioning as a feminist ethnographer, Wallis acknowledges the unavoidability of distortions and exclusions in any work of representation. One of these distortions is the seeming atemporal existence of these young migrant women, often portrayed as moored in the immobile mobility allowed by their techno-social practices, while voices from research participants hint at a less explored temporality: factory bosses are reported as seeing these women as ‘working little sisters’ (dagongmei 打工妹) who work ‘while waiting to be married off’ (21) and, as the author admits, ‘only a few of my informants were more than twenty-four years old, and those who were older were also more likely to be married and to be micro-entrepreneurs’ (160). Although Wallis recognizes the correlations between these demographics, unpacking the social mobility and relational trajectories of young migrant