

MOBILE COMMUNICATION AND RESISTANCE OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE PEARL RIVER DELTA AREA

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This article explores how the use of mobile phones among migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta Area (PRDA) of Mainland China affects the balance of power with their employers. It demonstrates that information and communication technologies (ICTs), rather than facilitating capital's domination, can be adopted to resist managerial control and reconstruct power relations from below. By providing job information to migrant workers, mobile phones bind the labor process to the local labor market. Managerial control in the labor process is heavily influenced by the local labor market context. Furthermore, mobile phone usage not only weakens the spatial constraint on migrant workers but also creates a virtual community within which they may form their own identity.

Keywords: control and resistance, migrant worker, mobile phone use, power relation

This article explores how mobile phone usage affects power relations between employers and migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta Area (PRDA) of Mainland China. Previous researchers who discuss labor process and technology (Braverman 1974; Friedman 1977; Burawoy 1985; Edwards 1979; Lee 1998; Pun 2005) mainly focus on the impact of technology on managerial control. Few of them systematically investigate how the implication of technology sometimes empowers the laborer. This article aims to remedy this situation by examining mobile phone usage among migrant workers in the PRDA. It demonstrates that, rather than facilitating capital's domination over migrant labor, information and communication technologies (CMICT), provide the potential for labor to resist

capital's control and thereby reconstruct the power relation from below. Based on data collected by a qualitative research between 2002 and 2005, this article discusses the effect of mobile phone usage on the control-resistance relationship between employers and migrant workers in the PRDA from the following three aspects: 1) mobile phone usage has created a new information channel, which provides migrant workers more job information and enhances their bargaining power with employers; 2) mobile phone usage has extended the mobility of laborers, hence lessening the spatial control of capital over the latter's activities; 3) mobile phone usage has generated a (virtual) boundary between migrant workers and employers, thereby strengthening the resistance identity among migrant workers.

MIGRANT WORKERS AND MOBILE PHONE USAGE

The Pearl River Delta Area (PRDA) has successfully maintained its position as the biggest manufacturing base in Mainland China since 1987. It hosts 33,000 corporations, which dominate the world's supply chain for light industrial products such as consumer goods, garments and accessories. In 2004, the Foreign Capitals Actually Utilized (FCAU) in the PRDA exceeded 11 billion USD and the Total Amounts of Exports (TAE) was about 181 billion USD.¹ As a result, the PRDA attracts a large number of young peasants from inner provinces such as Sichuan, Hunan, Guangxi, and Jiangxi, to seek employment. In 2000, there were more than 25.3 million migrant workers in Guangdong province, of which the PRDA accounted for 55 percent.² By January 2005, it was estimated that migrant workers in Guangdong province had reached 42 million.³ Obviously, the PRDA is the biggest migrant labor market in Mainland China.

Under China's current household registration system (*Huji Zhidu*), migrant workers are only permitted to work in cities but cannot be accepted as permanent city residents (Li and Tan 2000; Wang 2001). No matter how long they have worked in cities, they are always treated as a "floating population" and are discriminated by local residents (Wang 2001; Li and Tan 2000; Chu and Yang 2006). Moreover, the lack of permanent resident status in cities precludes migrant workers from a series of welfare services, such as health

insurance, labor protection and education. In the PRDA, most migrant workers took up skilled or semi-skilled jobs in labor-intensive factories. Compared with local residents and formal workers, they were among the lowest income groups in the PRDA. In 2004, the average monthly salary of migrant workers in the PRDA was about 964.8 RMB (including overtime pay), which equaled 57.9% of an average urban worker's salary in Guangdong province.⁴ However, in recent years, the number of mobile phone subscribers among migrant workers has sharply increased. Furthermore, the cost of mobile phone usage has become a major consumption item in their lives.

Since 1999, the mobile phone market has grown rapidly in Mainland China. There were only 43.3 million mobile phone subscribers in Mainland China in 1999 (Ministry of Information Industry). By 2006, the number of mobile phone subscribers in Mainland China had reached 461.08 million and the penetration rate was 35.3%.⁵ Guangdong province, as the biggest mobile phone market in Mainland China, had 71.2 million mobile phone subscribers in 2006. In 2002, there were only a small number of high-income migrant workers owning a mobile phone. According to a survey conducted by Peking University in the PRDA, in 2006, over 64 percent of migrant workers had purchased mobile phones.⁶ The average cost of their mobile communication was 97.56 RMB per month, which was equal to one-fifth of their monthly consumption.⁷ The main reason for their mobile phone is to

maintain contact with family members and their friends working in the PRDA. The penetration of mobile phone among migrant workers has brought fundamental changes in their social lives as well as influenced the power relation between migrant workers and their employers.

A THEORETIC FRAMEWORK AND KEY CONCEPTS

Most researchers who study the labor process (Braverman 1974; Friedman 1977; Edwards 1979; Burawoy 1985; Lee 1998) concentrate on how technological development generally favors the domination of capital. They argue that with the help of modern technologies and scientific management, capitalists successfully separate the conception of work from its execution, isolate labor in the work process, and diminish the autonomy and subjectivity of labor in various dimensions: economic, political, ideological, cultural, and even sexual (Braverman 1974; Friedman 1977; Edwards 1979; Burawoy 1985; Lee 1998; Ong 1987, 1991; Pun 2005). Following this logic, technology as the collaborator of capital is antagonistic to labor. The effect of technology on the labor process is often exploitive.

On the other hand, few studies have systematically discussed the significant role of labor's resistance (Thompson 1989). Vulnerable labor resistance, which is constricted by capitalistic structure, is only regarded as the by-product of capital control. Although some researchers (Edwards 1979; Thompson 1989) realized the contested nature of the labor process,

they did not explicitly elaborate the mechanism of labor resistance and its effect on the labor process. Underestimating the active struggle of labor and their strategic reaction will lessen understanding of the contradictory interaction of labor and capital in the contemporary factory regime. Labor, whether individual or collective, is the cofounder of the capitalistic labor process. As an active agent, labor is capable of adopting technologies and creating strategies to protect its own interests. In this sense, this article aims to emphasize how active labor shapes the power relation in the labor process with the help of new CMICTs.

Fundamentally, capital control and labor resistance constitute two sides of the same coin: the power relation, which is a key relation in the labor process. According to Foucault's micro power theory, modern power is a series of productive rather than repressive networks, which is not only localized in the State apparatus, but also reflected at the everyday level (Foucault 1980). Modern power engenders multiple disciplinary techniques to construct human body/conduct and penetrates its influence into every corner of daily life —e.g. sexuality, family, kinship, knowledge, and so forth (Foucault 1978, 1979, 1980). However, power as dominator always encounters resistance. While power produces its effect on the social body, it also finds a "counter-attack in the same body" (Foucault 1980:56). Power's mechanism is based on the contradictory action between offensive power and its counter-offensive force. As

Foucault mentioned, power is a “multiform production of relations of domination,” not “a binary structure with ‘dominator’ on one side and ‘dominated’ on the other” (Foucault 1980: 142). The main point in Foucault’s theory is the multiple and interactive characteristics of modern power. If control/domination is executed in multiple, diversified forms, then resistance, which exists at the same place with control/domination, is also multiple and variable. However, a power relation is also dialectical, defined by the interaction between control and resistance. Control creates the contested terrain where the dominator and the dominated meet and interact, while resistance affects the way and the direction of further control. Control is the ability/action of capitalists to “obtain desired work behavior” and work arrangement to realize their interests (Edwards 1979: 17). The aim of capital’s control in the labor process is to gain more profit (Thompson 1989). Resistance is the ability/action of labor to oppose and even to nullify capital’s control/domination. The aim of labor’s resistance is to maintain their autonomy in the labor process or to modify the factory regime to benefit their interests. Therefore, resistance is not only the result of control, but a countervailing force, which conditions the execution of control and affects the validity of control. Furthermore, resistance has the potential sometimes to invalidate or weaken control; capitalists have to make some modifications on their control to accommodate workers’ resistance (Thompson 1989). To some extent,

resistance tempers the intensity of control and directs it into new forms, thereby encountering new resistances.

Considering the power relation between employers and migrant workers in the PRDA, the usage of mobile phones among migrant workers breaks the former power balance between capital and labor. The flexibility and the ubiquitous connection provided by mobile phones bring new factors into the labor process. By providing job information to migrant workers, the mobile phone connects the laborer to the local labor market. The capacity of obtaining labor market information affects positions of advantage in the power relation. Managerial control in the labor process is strongly influenced by the local labor market. Mobile phone usage not only weakens the spatial constraint on migrant workers in the labor process, but creates a virtual community for them to form their own identity. Compared to earlier technologies promoting managerial control, mobile phone usage brings new benefits to the labor side. Therefore, with the invasion of new ICTs, technology is no longer the exclusive tool of capitalists. It also becomes an effective strategy of labor to resist capital control. To some extent, CMICTs force capital to adjust its control and reconstructs the power relation in the labor process from below.

THE RESEARCH METHOD

The data were collected between July 2003 and October 2005 in Dongguan city. Dongguan City is one of the eight economically developed cities

composing the PRDA. It includes 28 towns and four resident-districts. Dongguan city is located in the northeast PRDA and between two important cities in Guangdong province: Guangzhou City and Shenzhen City. The economy of Dongguan City is based on export-oriented industries, which are closely connected with the global capital market and the world product market. In 2005, there were more than 800 foreign companies in Dongguan City. Among them, 13 companies belong to the top 100 company in the world, such as Nokia, Samsung, Sony, and Philips.⁸ Foreign-invested and local-invested companies in Dongguan City absorbed a large number of migrant labor from hinterland provinces. Hence, Dongguan City is also considered to be a city of migrants. In 2005, compared with 1.66 million permanent residents, there were over 5.84 million migrants in Dongguan City.⁹ These migrants mainly came from Guangxi (18.32%), Sichuan (14.66%), Hunan (12.67%), Hubei (11.76%), and Henan (11.15%).¹⁰ Most of them were engaged in labor-intensive manufactures, such as plastics, toys, garments, electronic devices, and sports equipments.

Two towns in Dongguan City were selected to conduct the qualitative study¹¹ about migrant workers and their mobile phone usage: Humen town and Tangxia town. From July 2003 to October 2005, 61 informants were interviewed, including 50 migrant workers (30 male, 20 female), nine factory proprietors and managers (5 male, 4 female), and two local residents (1 male, 1 female). Among these informants, at least 21 informants

were interviewed over three times. Migrant workers in this study were mainly from four subcontract factories: one garment factory in Humen town, two golf-equipment factories in Tangxia town, and one electronic device factory in Humen town. Except for the electronic device factory owned by a Hong Kong entrepreneur, the other three factories used local capital. The initial contacts with migrant workers were established through their employers or the local sponsor. Then the researchers drew on further personal contacts with these workers and asked them to introduce their friends or relatives. Basically, interviews were conducted in factory offices, restaurants, and hotels. The language of interview was subject to the choice of each informant, either in the local Chinese dialect or in Mandarin. All interviews were semi-structured, which were guided by a set of key questions about migrant life (family background, migration history, current work and life state) and mobile phone usage (purchase motive, consumption, social relation through mobile phone usage). Based on this basic information, migrant workers were asked to give detailed descriptions about the relationship between mobile phone usage and their migrant lives in Dongguan City. The researchers also interviewed factory managers and local residents to enrich the narrative perspective and compare their mobile phone usage with migrant workers. In addition, field observation also provided some supplemental information. As some informants had to answer incoming calls or send SMS messages during interviews,

it was a good opportunity for researchers to observe how migrant workers used their mobile phones. When researchers conducted interviews in factories, they not only observed the labor process, but also compared different mobile phone usages of migrant workers in different places.

All interviews were tape-recorded, fully-transcribed and analyzed using the coding procedures developed by grounded theorists (Glazer and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Cobin 1998; Charmaz 2001). Interview transcripts and field notes were coded line-by-line. From the standpoint of grounded theory, line-by-line coding helps researchers to see “the familiar data in a new light and gain sufficient distance from taken-for-granted assumptions about the materials” (Charmaz 2001:342). More importantly, the researcher could use initial codes to break data into categories and to abstract ideas from them (Charmaz 2001).

MOBILE PHONE: A NEW INFORMATION CHANNEL

The first and foremost reason of mobile phone purchase among migrant workers is making connections with family members in their home town or friends in the PRDA. Before the broad penetration of mobile phone among migrant workers, it was very difficult to maintain contact with friends or relatives, even if they were working in factories nearby. The earlier communication difficulty was caused by the high mobility of migrant workers and the tight managerial control in factories. As a

floating population, migrant workers not only move regularly between their original villages and the destination city, but also among different factories and different towns. Without a mobile phone, they are not easily contactable. The tight control of management is another obstacle for migrant workers to maintain their social network. During their working hours, migrant workers are tightly controlled by their foremen. After working hours, workers also cannot easily contact their friends. Most migrant workers live in dormitories attached to factories because they are excluded from city housing provisions. The dormitory is an extended part of management control and constrains their social activities during leisure time (Pun and Smith 2007). Not every factory had installed fixed phones in the dormitory. Among the four factories in this study, only the electronic device factory invested by Hong Kong entrepreneurs provided fixed phones in workers’ dormitories. Even then, fixed phones are shared by more than ten workers and are constantly in use. As one worker put it:

The phone is always busy, particularly on weekends and holidays. Sometimes you have to wait for more than two hours and sometimes it is very unfortunate that when it is your turn, the party you call is engaged on the phone. (A young male worker, the electronic device factory)

Obviously, a mobile phone can reduce these difficulties and enable workers to connect with their social networks freely and easily. Social networks have an extremely important

meaning for migrant workers in the PRDA. Relatives and locals (lao-xiang) in the PRDA not only provide emotional support to migrant workers, but offer abundant information about job opportunity and conditions. The majority of migrant workers (over 78.1%) obtain their first jobs in the PRDA with the help of local networks.¹² After they enter the gate of the factory, local and kin-ethnic networks become a determinant factor in allocating tasks as the management manipulates local and kin-ethnic relations as a strategy to control workers (Lee 1998; Pun 2005). Before the arrival of mobile phones, workers' social networks were almost restricted within the factory and depended on face-to-face interactions. It was hard, if not impossible, for them to maintain their social network. A male worker recounted:

In the past it was not easy to find my friends. They are scattered in this town. Sometimes, they went back to their hometowns without telling me. I lost connections with many friends after they went back to their hometowns.

Once acquiring a mobile phone, this situation is fundamentally changed. Migrant workers are able to transgress the boundary of factory and diminish its spatial control over their activities (Kopamma 2000; Geser 2004). Even if it is impossible for them to meet their friends or relatives frequently, migrant workers can make a call or send a short message to express their greetings and good wishes. Thereafter, maintaining a stable social network in the PRDA has been much easier.

Having a mobile phone is mainly for the sake of convenience, especially making connection with friends. I did not meet some friends for a long time. Maybe, they have returned to their hometowns. But, (with a mobile phone), I can make contact with them. After we all have a mobile phone, we have more gatherings than before. (A young male worker, golf-equipment factory A)

More importantly, efficient connectivity and a stable network provide useful job information for migrant workers. In the past, in order to get job information, migrant workers had to look for job-vacancy posters on the front doors of factories (Law 2003). Nowadays, they just need to send a short message to their friends. As a worker said:

Usually, my friends send me a short message and ask whether there are job vacancies in my factory. If I tell them yes, they will give me a call and ask the details. If there is no job vacancy in my factory, I will send short messages to my other relatives or friends and require them to provide some information. (A male worker, the garment factory)

The low cost and easy accessibility of job information have improved the disadvantaged position of migrant workers. For the management, the most effective threat or punishment to workers' disobedience is dismissal. However, the availability of alternative employment poses a challenge to the power of employers/management. If workers are no longer afraid of being fired because they can easily get alternative jobs, then the effectiveness of management control

will decrease. All employers and managers interviewed in this research admitted that it was more difficult to discipline their workers now than before. The manager of a golf-equipment factory provided an example. Once there was a fight between two workers in his factory. A boy slapped a girl because she verbally abused him. After the investigation, the manager decided to support the girl and asked the boy to pay her 200 RMB as medical cost. The boy refused to pay the money and left the factory immediately. After several days, the manager was told that the boy soon found a new job in another factory. In this instance, the manager felt his power had been greatly challenged. The availability of alternative employment opportunities led the young man to quit his job (Law and Peng 2008). Similarly, the employer of the garment factory found that her workers became fastidious as they had so many complaints about the work timetable, job assignments and dormitory living conditions. If she could not adjust the work arrangement or improve the living conditions according to workers' requirement, they threatened to quit. Apparently, workers are now able to threaten management by quitting their jobs as a strategy to resist control and discipline.

From 2003 to 2005, four factories in this study all faced a labor shortage problem and the turnover rate was higher than before. According to Guangdong Statistic Bureau,¹³ Guangdong province was short of one million workers in 2005. More than two-third of the corporations in the PRDA had difficulty in recruiting

new migrant workers. Moreover, in non-state owned enterprises of the PRDA, the turnover rate of migrant workers was about 20 percent, which further exacerbated the labor shortage problem.¹⁴ Although labor shortage in the PRDA is a result of multiple reasons, evidence from this study shows that information of the job market brought by mobile phone usage among migrant workers is one of the factors contributing to the high turnover rate in the PRDA. As an employer complains:

If they have less information about the job market, they will be less likely to move around. The only way to reduce their contacts with others is to move our factory to a place where mobile phones cannot receive any signals. (An employer, the garment factory)

However, the wide coverage and reliable telecommunication network frustrates this employer's hope. Under this situation, migrant workers have more bargaining power and can fight for their rights more effectively than in the past (Law and Peng 2008). Besides more salary, migrant workers now demand more holidays, better living conditions, and more respectful treatment from the management. In order to keep their working force stable, employers and the management have to make some concessions. The employer of the garment factory has improved the living conditions of workers' dormitories. She also bought a hi-fi stereo component system to play music in the factory as workers wanted to listen to popular songs to cope with the work pressure. The manager of one golf-equipment factory

had to accept some “returning” workers. These workers left his factory to look for a better job elsewhere. When they failed, they wanted to go back to his factory. Considering the problem of labor shortage, the manager had to give them another chance. Although employers adopt some soft strategies to mitigate their relations with workers, they seldom raise a worker’s salary. As subcontractors, cheap labor is their main competitive edge. Among these four factories, only the garment factory has raised their workers’ salary. In their leisure time, workers often make a call to their friends or relatives in other factories to inquire about job opportunities. Once they discover that “any of these conditions of another factory are better than that of their own factory, they will quit after the lunch break” (Law and Peng 2008).

By mobile phone usage, migrant workers obtain an information advantage in the local labor market. Relying on the information provided by mobile communication, migrant workers can actively adopt job-changing as a strategy to resist the domination of their employers and strive for more rights and benefits. In this sense, the power of managements is counterbalanced by migrant workers. Therefore, the labor process is no longer an independent and isolated activity but is closely connected with the local labor market through the new information technologies. If job-changing is an overt struggle of migrant workers, then the following discussion will reveal some hidden tactics engendered by their mobile phone usage.

MOBILE PHONE USAGE: AN EXTENSION OF LABOR’S BODY

Besides the provision of information, mobile phone usage among migrant workers also affects actual shop-floor behaviors and relationships. It partly weakens the control of the body developed by “scientific management” and Fordism’s assembly line. Before the intervention of the mobile phone in the labor process, capital successfully utilizes the control of space to dominate labor (Ong 1987, 1991; Lee 1998; Pun 2005). By placing a worker’s body on a specific position on the assembly line and constraining its activities, capital isolates laborers from one another. By specifying exact bodily posture and requiring tedious repetition, capital produces docile bodies without minds (Ong 1991; Pun 2005). The aim of these controls of the labor process is to: improve productivity, maximize surplus value and minimize the possibilities of labor resistance (Ong 1991).

However, mobile phone usage among migrant workers challenges capital’s corporeal control and discipline. To some extent, it extends the worker’s body and emancipates labor from the constraint of space. Although their bodies are still located on the assemble line, migrant workers are not isolated any more. With a mobile phone, migrant workers can easily make connections with their networks despite the constant surveillance of management. Social contacts enabled by the mobile phone satisfy many psychological needs of migrant workers. Mobile communication

creates a virtual presence of friends and relatives, who are physically absent. (Kopomma 2000; Höflich 2002; Gergen 2003). This virtual companionship reduces workers' feelings of loneliness and unprotectedness at work.

In this study, all four factories forbid workers' mobile phones usage during working hours. Some employers even do not allow workers to bring their mobile phones with them to work. Employers and management believe that using mobile phones during working time distracts workers' attention and may cause accidents in the manufacturing process. However, migrant workers develop some strategies to resist the regulation. They hide their mobile phones in their pockets when they work. They switch their phones to vibration-mode to avoid being detected when they receive incoming calls or short messages. If they want to make contact with their friends or relatives during working hours, they prefer sending short messages instead of making voice calls. Using the restroom also becomes a good excuse for making phone calls. As a female migrant worker said:

In our factory, it is okay for us to carry mobile phones. But, we are fined if we use mobile phones during working hours. Sometimes, when I receive an incoming call, I will tell my foreman that I want to use the restroom... I answer the call in the restroom. (A young female worker, the electronic factory)

By using these tactics, migrant workers retain some autonomy in their private communications at work. These

intimate, private communications satisfy different needs for migrant workers. As a worker explains:

I always carry my mobile phone. I seldom receive calls or send short messages when I am working. But, having a mobile phone handy, I feel safe. I know I will not miss any call from my family. I am married and have a six-year-old son. If there is some urgent things happened in my home, I can be reached easily. (A thirty-year-old male worker, golf-equipment factory A)

Some male workers send short messages during working time to arrange their leisure activities. Social gatherings after work help them to maintain their friendships:

(Before got off work) I often send my friends (in other factories) short messages to make appointments. We talk about 'after-work' social gatherings, such as having a drink... We have more gatherings after we all bought mobile phones. (A male worker, golf-equipment factory A)

Some young workers enjoy chatting with their friends using SMS during working hours. As 'scientific management' fragments labor skills into simple procedures, the assembly work becomes the tedious repetition of bodily movements (Ong 1991; Pun 2005). Working time becomes unbearably boring. Under these conditions, workers create strategies to energize and distract themselves such as passing food on the line, listening to the radio, or day dreaming (Lee 1998; Pun 2005). Passing SMS messages has become the workers' favorite strategy to alleviate the boredom of work:

I send short messages during working times. When I receive messages from my friends, I will immediately reply. We just want to know what happened, how about their work. (A female worker, golf-equipment A)

Topics of their chat are focused on their work and migrant lives. Sometimes, they also send jokes or poems to cheer one another up. This mode of communication reassures migrant workers and maintains their personal networks (Johnsen 2003). The virtual presence of absent friends and relatives is an important emotional support to these lonely workers.

In addition, some young workers even purchase the on-line chat service to meet new friends in cyberspace and search for romantic experiences during working time (Law and Peng 2006). There are so many chat rooms and on-line networks set up by mobile network providers in Mainland China. By sending a message to the service center, workers can easily log into a chat room or access the list of subscribers on-line. In a chat room, workers can freely choose their chat partners. Usually, they prefer to search for opposite-sex friends who have similar background and experience. Initially, they exchange personal information and later they exchange mobile phone numbers and use short messages. Distinct from chatting with friends, the on-line chat is full of mystery, novelty, and romance. A female worker who enjoys on-line chat said:

On-line chat is fun. Even though he is a stranger, you can talk with him. You can hear lots of sweet words because

they want to please you. I know most words are not reliable. But, these sweet words are seldom heard in your real life, right? It is just for fun. (A female shop-floor worker, golf-equipment factory A)

This female worker once sent one hundred and sixty short messages during working hours. Nimble fingers produced by the assembly line work enable her to finish a short message within a minute and simultaneously chat with seven to eight friends on-line. She realizes that the virtual relation is not serious and seldom makes face-to-face interaction with her friends on-line. But, like daydreaming, the virtual romance enlivens her tedious working hours and satisfies her emotional needs. It also provides a great comfort to their otherwise often banal lives (Law and Peng 2006; Lin 2005).

Although employers and management are annoyed by workers' mobile phone usage during working hours, they have not developed strategies to prevent them. It is impossible for management to check every worker every day. Sending or receiving short messages is easy to conceal. Most employers and managers choose to turn a blind eye to workers' mobile phone usage, provided that it does not seriously affect their performance and efficiency (Lin 2005).

Mobile communication has become a hidden strategy of migrant workers to resist the alienation of work and body-control in the labor process. As the modern communication technology has dissolved the limitations of space and time, capital's body-control is partly

alleviated. Ubiquitous connections penetrate into every activity of the factory, thereby opening the labor process to the concerns of personal lives. This demonstrates that the labor process is also shaped by the worker's agency.

MOBILE PHONE: VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AND RESISTANCE IDENTIFICATION

According to Wellman (2001), the community in the information society is constituted by networks, not groups. He redefines "community" as "networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity" (Wellman 2001:228). In this sense, it is arguable that mobiles have created a virtual community for migrant workers. Firstly, stable social networks established by mobile phone usage have provided job information, emotional support and social activities. Secondly, due to their high mobility, their community is not located in physical places, but centers around individuals' networks. Basically, this virtual community is constructed by their daily communication activities. Only in their virtual community are mobile communication activities of migrant workers imbued "with meaning, belonging and identity" (Wellman 2001:229).

Owning a mobile phone is a prerequisite for migrant workers to gain access to this virtual community. Purchasing a mobile phone becomes a migrant workers' first and foremost

concern at arriving in a new city. As an employer mentioned:

They are eager for a mobile phone. Workers in my factory try their best to buy a mobile phone as soon as possible. They borrow money from their colleagues. They cut expense on meals and clothes to buy mobile phone. (The employer of golf-equipment factory A)

The boundary of their virtual community is defined by contact lists in their mobile phones. Exchanging mobile phone numbers means accepting each other as trustworthy "insiders." According to the interviews conducted in the four factories, most migrant workers usually accept relatives, colleagues, locals, and friends as their community members. The contact list also reveals the scale of one's social network. The longer the contact lists are, the more social relations their owners have. Therefore, exchanging mobile phone numbers becomes an important means to socialize:

(The information of) our mobile phone numbers is transmitted very fast. I changed my phone number yesterday. But, all my colleagues and friends know my new number today. When I changed my mobile phone number, I would tell my friend this news. She would ask: what is your new number? Then I told her my new number. After a while, she passed this news to others. Soon, all my friends and colleagues will know my new number. (A young female worker, golf-equipment factory A)

Maintaining the virtual community also relies on mobile communication. All migrant workers interviewed in this study

said that they called their family members at least once a week. Over 80 percent of the informants admitted that they contacted their networks everyday. Short message is the most popular way to make connections. As a young female worker said:

Almost everyday, we spend some time to work on short messages. If I did not receive messages, I would send to others. We must send (short messages) for a while everyday. Otherwise, life will be very boring. (A female worker, golf-equipment factory B)

Sending a joke to amuse friends is also a popular way to express one's concern and to nurture a friendship:

I often receive some jokes from my friends. These jokes are very funny. I forward some interesting ones to my other friends and store some in my mobile phone. These messages are very good. I can feel the support from my friends in these messages. (A young male worker, golf-equipment factory B)

The frequency of receiving calls or short messages demonstrates the intensity of one's network in the virtual community. Through frequent contacts with friends, they have obtained a sense of belonging to the virtual community. They feel isolated when they lose contact with their networks:

If I have not received any message for a few days, I will feel a bit unhappy and isolated. (A male worker, golf-equipment factory B)

I expect to receive messages from my friends. If I have not received messages for two to three days, I will think why

my friends do not send me messages. (A male worker, golf-equipment factory A)

Interestingly, employers and the management are excluded from migrant workers' virtual community. Even if migrant workers disseminate their mobile phone numbers very broadly, seldom do they provide them to their employers or the management. Even if they have the foreman's number, they seldom send their foreman messages, let alone jokes and greeting messages. A young female migrant worker offered a good example:

The worker: once, a girl in our factory sent greeting messages to every one of us when we start to work everyday.'

Interviewer: Did she also send this kind of greeting messages to the management?

The worker: No. I think she did not.

Interviewer: Did you send short messages to your foreman or your employer?

The worker: No. Never.

Interviewer: Why?

The worker: Because we are different. They are the bosses.

These words show that migrant workers have consciously drawn a virtual boundary between themselves and the employers/management by managing their mobile phone usage. This virtual boundary is an excluding strategy developed by migrant workers so as to resist management. In a modern factory regime, capital employs stratagems to establish and maintain the hierarchy in the factory and segregate managerial staff

from workers. All four factories in this study provide better living conditions for the management. Except the garment factory, the other three factories differentiate managements from workers by wearing different working clothes. The electronic device factory owned by Hong Kong entrepreneurs has regulations that forbid workers from access to the office building and the managers' canteen. By consciously excluding workers from their working and living area, the management successfully marks a workers' status as inferior.

However, as Foucault argued, power also faces the counter-attack in the same body that it dominates (Foucault 1980). Migrant workers, although controlled and excluded by management, are not passively accepting this treatment. They actively create a counter-excluding strategy. Excluding management from their mobile communication not only avoids workers' virtual community being invaded by capital's power, but also constructs their resistance to management's discrimination and exclusion in the labor process. It is often hard for management to understand why workers are so fascinated with the mobile phone. In this study, most employers and management treat mobile phone purchasing as irrational actions on the part of migrant workers. The misunderstanding prevents workers and management from reaching consensus on mobile phone use during working hours.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates how the new information technology reshapes the power relation between migrant workers and their employers in Southern China. The above analyses show that technology is not always monopolized by capital. It also sometimes empowers labor to resist the domination of capital. Compared with traditional technology, CMICTs are more flexible and penetrative, entering into every level of the labor process. By using mobile phones, labor has engendered multiple resistances to challenge the power of capital. Ubiquitous information directly connects the local labor market to the labor process. Information advantages remedy the degradation of labor brought by deskilling. Consequently, labor retains some power in the labor process.

This can partly explain the high turnover rate and the labor shortage problem in the PRDA. On the shop floor, labor control executed by Taylor's scientific management and Ford's assembly line also faces new problems. Body control no longer guarantees the isolation of labor. Perpetual connectivity brought by mobile communication liberates labor from the harsh surveillance and enables workers to indulge in their virtual community at any time. The boundary between work and private life is blurred. And the labor process becomes a mixed process which is permeated by labor's leisure activities and emotional lives. In addition, the virtual community based on mobile communication provides a space for labor to look for

social identity. Excluding management from their virtual community reflects labor's conscious resistance. The mutual-exclusion relation will have negative influence on the future interaction between labor and capital. The adoption of CMICTs enriches labor's capacity to resist. Mobile phone usage among migrant labor goes "beyond conventional dichotomies of individual and collective" resistance in the labor process research (Pun 2005:194). It combines the overt resistance with the covert confronting behavior and associates the collective struggle with individual strategies. Through mobile phone usage, migrant labor develops multiple resistance strategies to strive for their economic interest, emotional needs, and social identity.

Besides discussing the effect of CMICTs on labor's resistance, this article also sheds light on the contested and interactive nature of power. As mentioned above, mobile phone usage shifts the

power balance in the labor process. In order to keep the control over labor, capital has to make some adjustments to their dominating tactics. Soft strategies include improving living conditions, raising workers' salary, and making concession on recruitment policy. A hard discipline is expressed in the rule of forbidding worker's mobile phone usage in the factory. But workers also adapt new strategies. They shift between different jobs or factories to maximize their benefit. Obviously, the power relation between labor and capital is not static but an interactive and dialectic process. Labor is not a passive party in the power relation, but an important co-constructor who determines the power relation from below. In this case, it is labor that creates a new contested terrain and modifies the direction of capital's control. Therefore, exploring the power relation between capital and labor should take both parties into proper consideration in order to better understand the complex and dialectical ties that bind them.

NOTES

- 1 See Guangdong Statistic Bureau: 2005, *Guangdong Statistic Year Book*, Guangdong Statistic Information Web, http://www.gdstats.gov.cn/tjnj/table/19/19_c.htm.
- 2 See National Bureau of Statistics of China: 2003, *The Fifth Population Census Essays*, China Statistics Press, P. 280.
- 3 Data Source: <http://media.163.com>.
- 4 See Guangdong Statistic Bureau: 2005, *The Report of Corporation Recruitment in the Pearl River Delta Area*, Guangdong Statistic Information Web, http://www.gdstats.gov.cn/tjnj/table/gaishu_c.htm.

- 5 See the Ministry of Information Industry website: <http://www.mii.gov.cn>.
- 6 Data source: 2006, *The Report of Migrant Workers and their Mobility Status in PRDA*, Sociology Department, Peking University.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Data source: Dongguan government website, www.dg.gov.cn.
- 9 Data source: Dongguan government website, www.dg.gov.cn.
- 10 Data source: 2006, *The Report of Migrant Workers and their Mobility Status in PRDA*, Sociology Department, Peking University.
- 11 The study has been funded by grants from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University since 2003. Besides the author, the research collaborators include Pui-lam Law and Chu Wai-chi from Department of Applied Social Sciences of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Yang shan hua and Cheng Weimin from Department of Sociology of Peking University, Liu Xiaojing from the Research Development Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences of PRC, and postgraduate students from Sociology Department of Peking University.
- 12 Data source: 2006, *The Report of Migrant Workers and their Mobility Status in PRDA*, Sociology Department, Peking University.
- 13 See Guangdong Statistic Bureau: 2005, *The Report of Corporation Recruitment in Pearl River Delta Area*, Guangdong Statistic Information Web, http://www.gdstats.gov.cn/tjnj/table/gaishu_c.htm.
- 14 See Guangdong Statistic Bureau: 2005, *The Report of Corporation Recruitment in Pearl River Delta Area*, Guangdong Statistic Information Web, http://www.gdstats.gov.cn/tjnj/table/gaishu_c.htm.

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