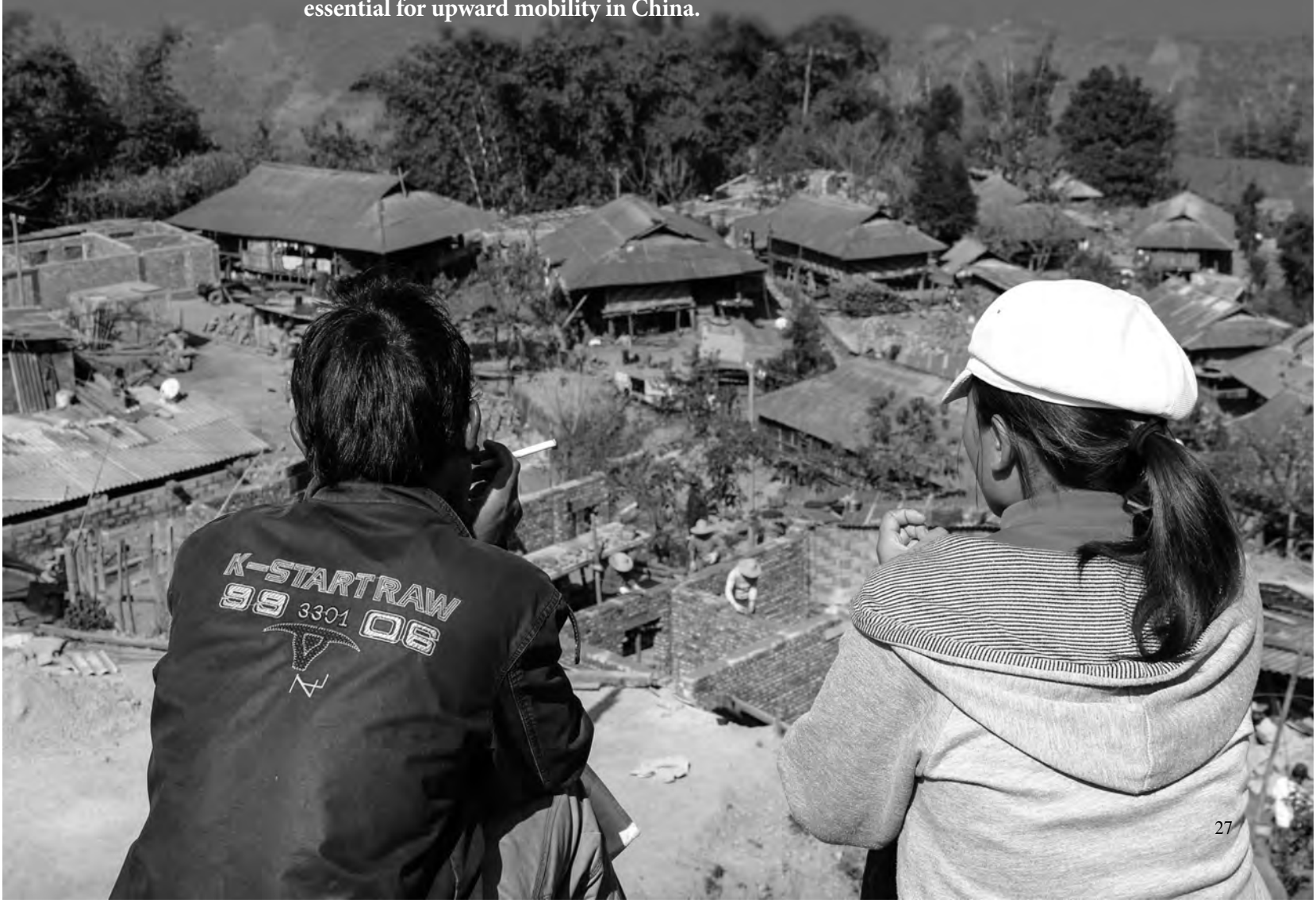
Wa Minority Youth and Mobile Phones in Urban China

By Tzu-kai Liu

This is a tale of labor migration and the social networking experiences of China's Wa ethnic minority group. The PRC government classifies the Wa people as one of fifty-five ethnic minorities in the country. Facing poverty and dismal economic opportunities in their rural homelands, the Wa—along with innumerable minority youths in their teens and twenties, such as the Miao and Tibetans—have migrated to China's coastal manufacturing centers in search of menial factory work. These "floating populations" of migrant workers often view urban manufacturing employment not only as an economic necessity, but also a social adventure—a chance to change their fate and have access to cosmopolitan consumer cultures.[1] However, they face age-old social prejudices on the part of Han-Chinese employers and established urban residents. In the multilingual and multicultural urban environments in which they find themselves, being proficient in China's standard language—Mandarin Chinese—and having access to social networks are, now more than ever, essential for upward mobility in China.



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Gab and Min looking down on their village.
Photo: Tzu-kai Liu

For all migrants, life as a low-level factory worker in urban China entails experiences of language prejudice, class subordination, and labor exploitation. But it is especially tough for ethnic minority youths who face all those obstacles along with discrimination based on their ethnic background, languages, and lower levels of literacy in Mandarin Chinese. Compared to native Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese, ethnic minorities are typically not as well-educated and occupy the lowest rung of the working-class ladder when it comes to job hiring. The combination of poor schooling and social inequality becomes a daunting task in which ethnic minorities like the Wa must compete with their Han counterparts to achieve job promotion in a Mandarin-Han dominant labor market. To be successful, there is enormous pressure to assimilate to mainstream Han Chinese culture and to be connected with others via mobile communications technologies. Though state censorship on the Internet has been criticized for years as civic intervention by many Chinese citizens, development of the telecommunications industry has rapidly expanded in the past decade. China has created its own domestic information and communication technologies (ICT) and claims the largest population of mobile phone and Internet users in the world. Use of mobile phones and social media are a part of the everyday lives of migrant workers.[2] The migration of labor is connected with these developments in the mobile industry, which provides affordable mobile texting services and a market for second-hand or knock-off cellphones in factory towns and elsewhere in China. The story of Gab and Min, a young Wa couple in their late teens, serves to illustrate the intersection of labor migration and mobile communications technology among China's migrant ethnic minority youth.

Google map pointing to Cangyuan. Source: http://tiny.cc/2pnazw.

In mid-April 2011, a few days before the Buddhist New Year, Gab and Min squatted down on a hilltop in their home community in Cangyuan, located in the ethnic Wa Autonomous County in Yunnan Province along China's southwest borders. After leaving their homeland to work at a toy manufacturing plant in southeast China for two years, they came home to reunite with their families while the factory was temporarily closed for holiday. In their absence, their community had witnessed a rapid housing transformation from traditional Wa stilt architecture to modern brick houses. This change began prior to their initial departure, when the PRC government proposed modernizing the rural, mountainous Wa lands. The construction of new housing was a part of state-funded efforts to reduce regional poverty by investing in infrastructure. Along with the government's aid, each household still had to pay two-thirds of the construction costs, which were much higher than the annual income of a Wa family. To help their families raise cash for the construction of their new homes, Gab and Min had to "go out" and find work in the city. Each headed for Shenzhen in southeast China.

A booming urban city directly north of Hong Kong, Shenzhen is an industrial center that has rapidly expanded its city landscape since the 1980s under state-promoted development of special economic zones. The establishment of industrial districts in Shenzhen has attracted millions of young people from rural China in search of factory job opportunities. Most Wa migrant youth are currently employed in assembly-line production of electronics, cosmetics, sport shoes, toys, and furniture in Shenzhen, which are exported to developed countries and elsewhere.[3] Most minority Wa youths migrate shortly after dropping out of school or graduation from local, junior high boarding schools. Usually, they have no previous travel or work experience in a big city.

Like many Wa youths in their teens, Gab and Min were unable to continue their high school educations because of financial hardships faced by their families. Lack of a high school education is one of the primary reasons that ethnic minorities do not attain linguistic proficiency in their second language, Mandarin-Chinese. Gab was the eldest child in his family. He sacrificed his own educational opportunity to support his family and make it possible for his three younger siblings to attend school. Min was the youngest in her family, and her experience was slightly different. She explained, "I got a sufficient score on my high school entrance exam, but my parents could not afford to have me continue my education because of a shortage of money. I cried about that for almost a week. I worked on my family farm for two years and then decided to move out of the countryside and find factory work in Shenzhen."[4] Though they attended the same junior high boarding school in their home district, they were in different grades and did not actually meet one another until after migrating to Shenzhen. They became connected through mobile phones when they worked in the same industrial district of the city.

Who are the Wa?

The Wa people are an ethnic minority who inhabit the border region between southwest China and northeast Myanmar (Burma). Amidst the economic, migratory, and political realities of transborder living, the Wa seldom fit into a fixed ethnic category because of distinctive cultural and linguistic differences among them. The various Wa dialects belong to the Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic) language family of mainland Southeast Asia.

Growing trends in out-migration (for labor and education) and inter-ethnic marriage have caused rapid demographic changes, yet the majority of Wa people still live in rural, mountainous areas of their homeland. In China, the Wa number approximately 390,000, including those in the Wa Autonomous counties of Cangyuan and Ximeng in Yunnan Province, as well as migrant workers and married members scattered elsewhere in China. In Myanmar, the number of Wa people living in the northeastern Wa State surpasses 600,000.

Political influences play a significant role in Wa ethnicity. Despite the rich diversity among Wa people, the Chinese government has designated them as a singular "Wa Nationality" (ch. wazu). They are categorized as one of fifty-five ethnic minorities—officially established in the PRC's ethnological classification project of the 1960s—and are named accordingly in Chinese academic research publications and the public media. Under the patriotic emblem of a multiethnic nation-state, the term "Wa Nationality" also circulates in China's tourist industry to depict the Wa people and lands as part of the nation's primitive past.

In Myanmar, the region inhabited by the Wa is an administrative unit referred to as the Wa State. Exempt from direct political governance by the Burmese state, this semi-independent region is controlled by the United Wa State Army. The area has caught the attention of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNIDCP) for its long history of poppy cultivation and narcotics use. Since 2005, many anti-drug campaigns have been carried out in the Wa State with financial aid and civic programs initiated by international NGOs.

Distinctive Wa cultural practices include thatched stilt housing, water buffalo killing rituals, wooden-drum dances, and hair-swinging dances. Traditionally, the Wa practiced animist rituals such as head-hunting until it was officially banned in the 1960s. Influenced by more than a century of transborder, socioeconomic interactions with lowland societies such as the Dai/Tai and Burmese, some Wa have converted from animism to Theravada Buddhism. Others have accepted Christian beliefs under the influence of Western missionaries.

Wa thatched stilt house. Source: http://tiny.cc/m6lazw.

Hair-swinging dance. Source: *English News.cn* website at http://tiny.cc/fspazw.

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Min and Gab were born in the mid-1990s, and their experience of long-term labor migration is quite distinct from the seasonal migration patterns of middle-aged Wa villagers and their contemporaries, who married early and stayed home to work on family farms. These two groups leave home only when they can be spared from agricultural demands in the late fall and winter; many of them look for work in the mining areas of northeastern Myanmar, just over the border from the Wa Autonomous region. With respect to marriage and work plans, gender accounts for a very different trajectory of labor migration for minority females compared to males. Many of Min's fellow female villagers got married in their early twenties—either voluntarily or under pressure from their parents—and remained in their homeland. Min and other teenagers like her who seek to escape the pressure to marry young and a lifetime of heavy agricultural work as a farmer's wife migrate to the cities and stay there for long periods of time. As a means to avoid returning home to a life of poverty, some Wa females choose to marry Han Chinese migrants, who have better socioeconomic prospects than their Wa male counterparts. Young Wa boys who make it to the urban centers hold onto the dream of living in the city, but confronted with discrimination on all fronts, most of them cannot afford urban life and end up having to move back home for economic reasons or to care for aging parents and agricultural responsibilities on family farms.

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When Gab first arrived in Shenzhen in his late teens, he had just dropped out of junior high school and experienced a harder time being hired for factory work than Min, who was two years younger. Unlike ethnic minority girls, who are seen as more docile and willing to conform to long hours and heavy workloads than their male counterparts, minority boys are often stigmatized as less diligent and "uncivilized," according to mainstream Chinese norms. When the factory gave Gab his first month's wage (around RMB $1,100 [US $183]), he went directly to a secondhand shop at a local market to buy his first mobile phone. Until fairly recently, use of mobile telephones was expensive and mainly utilized only by wealthy people in China. However, these communication technologies have become much more widely available in the past decade, and for migrants with no family network to lean on far from home, reliance on digital networks and urban "talent markets" is pervasive. In his second month of migrant life in the city, Gab spent almost all his off-work hours at Internet cafés connecting with friends, watching online TV programs, or playing online games. Gab and Min met for the first time after she came to work in Shenzhen and had acquired her own mobile phone.

A talent market where migrant Wa youth find factory work in Shenzhen, China. Photo: Tzu-kai Liu

Interest in mobile networking among Wa youth is similar to that of other young ethnic minorities who migrate to the cities, desiring a more cosmopolitan lifestyle and influenced by media portrayals of urban China. Acquiring a mobile phone is the highest priority among these youth, who view it as a personal device for fulfilling their information needs, facilitating grassroots connections, coordinating political actions, and developing new friendships in the labor market. Mobile networking also offers leisure-time freedom from heavy workloads; normally twelve to fourteen hours per day with continuous day/night shifts. Many workers rely on prepaid mobile telephones to connect with ethnic fellows or strangers on QQ, a Chinese-language online messaging platform owned by Tencent. In 2007, Tencent began offering Mobile QQ, a social media platform (like Twitter) that is now widely used by working-class populations in urban China. Migrant workers can use their prepaid mobile phones to connect to QQ wirelessly during their breaks at work or when traveling between cities and their rural homelands. QQ Space, a social networking site provided by Tencent (roughly equivalent to MySpace before Facebook overtook it) has become popular among minority Wa workers since 2009. Whereas middle-class Chinese prefer using social networking sites such as Renren.com (equivalent to Facebook in its early days) and Pengyou.com, minority Wa workers use their mobile phones to connect to Mobile QQ or QQ Space. Yet few, if any, have experience with these technologies back home.

Because all mobile texting is composed in Mandarin Chinese, there are huge language barriers for users who lack competency in the dominant dialect. Not only do Wa migrant youth lack a writing system suitable for expression in their native language, they are generally not highly literate in their *second* language, which is a regional variety of Mandarin. They are neither "digital natives" well-versed in using technology nor proficient in Mandarin, which requires knowledge of thousands of symbols/characters. The one writing system Wa migrant youth *do* know is the Roman alphabet-based pinyin system taught in schools across China to increase literacy rates, especially in rural areas of the country. Chinese speakers can be grouped linguistically into seven dialect families, each of which consists of several regional variations. Though their speech is often not mutually intelligible, speakers of different varieties of Chinese use the same writing system with a shared set of Chinese characters. Pinyin is employed to represent the speech sounds of Mandarin Chinese as either single characters or in combinations of several characters. All messaging input on digital media begins with the pinyin system, which is then automatically converted to symbols/characters via an input method editor (IME). In order to produce any digital message, a user must first input the pinyin letters on his or her keyboard and then choose among actual Chinese characters that pop up on the display screen as predicted by the IME. Recognizing the characters and knowing which one to choose in a particular context is the domain of users who are literate in standard Mandarin. For semi-literate Wa youth who want to engage in digital messaging, this steep learning curve is overcome by an intense desire for connection rather than perfection in language use.

This desire is evident in their conversations on social networking sites, where they risk public humiliation for being "slow" to enter text in chat interfaces. Some minority youth create unique linguistic expressions or codes to express their ethnic identities by typing the sounds of regional Chinese dialects or native minority languages into Chinese words. In this way, nonstandard changes in mobile texting and messaging can resemble locally defined ethnic expressions, such as those used in rural Wa homelands. By connecting to others who know the Chinese regional dialect or Wa language well, they create a unique discursive space, or "cyber zone," to differentiate themselves from other urban migrants who speak different dialects of Chinese and other minority languages.

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Official state control of information flows on Internet platforms have been seriously criticized by the Chinese public and Western powers as political intervention that undermines global citizenship and human rights.[5] In addition to its official prohibition of Western social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, China's state censorship of domestic microblogs is frequently carried out through deletion of sensitive posts containing officially banned news, information, or keywords. Because messaging/texting via mobile phones is synchronous and instantaneous, it is difficult for censors to restrain this form of communication, regardless of the language being used. Mobile phone users all over China can deliberately type and instantly forward posts to their friends well before state censorship orders are implemented. For ethnic minorities like the Wa, whose marked regional use of Mandarin and native Wa speech features are reflected in their texting and chat, it is less likely that their messages will be easily understood by outsiders. The implications of this unorthodox system of writing include the ability to fly under the radar of China's censorship forces for political purposes, such as organizing labor protests.

For ethnic minority migrants like Gab and Min, mobile networking creates an ethnic-based cyber community where one is lacking and provides a broader sense of shared experience that mitigates the harshness of the minority migrant experience. After knowing one another for some time in Shenzhen, the couple decided to get engaged when Min got pregnant. Like other female migrant workers who get hurt, sick, or pregnant, ethnic minority females are on their own to find solutions for health care, with limited medical support from the factories where they work. When Min could no longer work and Gab could not support them on his own, the couple went back to their homeland in the Wa Autonomous Region to find support from their families.

Further shaping mobile phone services in China is the growing need of Wa migrants and other ethnic minorities to connect with their families in rural areas. Since 2006, China's major mobile phone company has begun offering wireless service and opening mobile phone shops in every rural ethnic minority township in China. While demographic patterns of labor migration start with people moving from rural regions to the cities, both migrants and the mobile telecommunications industry are reversing information flows from cities back to rural areas like the Wa Autonomous Counties. ■

Roman alphabet-based simplified Chinese pinyin system used in mobile texting. Photo: Tzu-kai Liu

NOTES

1. See Leslie T. Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008).
2. For further discussion of Chinese migrant workers' engagement with mobile phone technology in China, please see Jack Linchuan Qiu, *Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009) and Cara Wallis, *Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
3. See Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
4. "Min," December 2010, interview.
5. See Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) and Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State and Society in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

TZU-KAI LIU, who earned a PhD at the University of Illinois, is a Sociocultural and Linguistic Anthropologist who is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, National Science Council in Taipei, Taiwan. His publications include: "Reconstructing Cultural Heritage" and "Imagining Wa Primitiveness in the China/Myanmar Borderlands," in *Cultural Heritage Politics*, T. Blumenfield and H. Silverman, eds. (Springer, 2013); and "Planting" in *New House: Cultural Meaning of House Construction among the Wa in Yunnan, China* (Tangshan Publisher, 2004, in Chinese). He is currently working on his edited book, *Ethnic Networking and Mobility in China.*