Introduction

*Mobile Bodies, Mobile Technologies, and Immobile Mobility*

The Harmony Market sits at a busy intersection near one of Beijing’s embassy districts, and like many indoor marketplaces erected in the city in the new millennium, it consists of several floors packed with vendors—mostly rural-to-urban migrants—selling everything from souvenirs and crafts to knock-off designer clothing, footwear, and handbags. In the spring of 2007 I met Wu Huiying and Li Xiulan, two young rural women who worked in the basement of Harmony Market selling sports shoes. Li Xiulan was sixteen and from Henan province, and she had been in Beijing for six months working for her uncle. Wu Huiying was seventeen and from Anhui province, and when she had left home at fifteen she had originally joined her older sister, who was selling jeans at another large marketplace in Beijing. She and her sister had lived and worked together for nearly three years, but her sister was expecting a baby and had recently gone home. Wu Huiying had considered
returning as well—she didn’t particularly care for Beijing or its residents (“They are too proud and look down on outsiders,” she said)—but felt like there was nothing for her back home. Now on her own in Beijing, Wu Huiying had sought a job at Harmony Market because she felt she could learn English there due to the large number of foreign visitors. Both Wu Huiying and Li Xiulan worked every day from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., with one day off each month, and they ate most meals at the cafeteria on the top floor of the market. Wu Huiying earned a monthly salary of 1,000 yuan (about US $129), and Li Xiulan, because she was still “in training,” made 300 yuan (about US $39).²

When I first met Wu Huiying and Li Xiulan they were busy writing some Chinese-English translations in a small notebook, and upon discovering I could speak Chinese Li Xiulan asked me how to pronounce some basic English expressions. Once they learned that I was studying mobile phone use, Wu Huiying proudly showed me a bronze-colored Nokia candy-bar phone, upon which she had glued a few rhinestones. It was a basic phone with only voice and texting capabilities, and since it didn’t have a model name or number, it was quite possibly a fake. Her older sister had bought it in 2002 for 2,000 yuan (around US $240 at the time, and quite a lot of money for a migrant worker), and she had given Wu Huiying the phone in 2006. The fact that the phone was relatively old, had limited functions, and was a hand-me-down didn’t lessen its value in Wu Huiying’s eyes. On the contrary, this particular phone was extremely important to her and carried multiple meanings. Without doubt the phone was a significant communication medium. Midway during our conversation Wu Huiying showed me an extra SIM card and said, “This one is for my friends. When I’m working I don’t keep it in the phone because I don’t want to bother my friends while they are working or to be bothered.”³ The other SIM card, which was placed in the phone during work, was for her family so that they could call her (and vice versa) if something was urgent. Aside from communication, however, this particular phone held other significance. It was Wu Huiying’s first phone, and it had become a part of her. She didn’t want to upgrade to a new phone because she felt she had no use for other features. With the phone cradled between her two hands, she smiled and told me, “You can’t get one like this anymore. It’s so precious.”

As Wu Huiying and I discussed her phone, Li Xiulan lifted her head up from her notebook and stated that as soon as she could, she was going to buy
a brand-name phone with a camera and Internet capability. Although she'd had a used phone passed down from a relative, her aunt had taken it away because she felt Li Xiulan was staying up too late texting with friends and as a result didn't have any energy to work. “She thinks the phone has a bad effect on a young girl like me,” she said. We chatted a bit longer, but customers were arriving and browsing the rows of shoes, so I told the two women I should get going. As I was leaving, Wu Huiying asked for my mobile number so she could send me some jokes. Then she said she had to get back to work or her boss (who wasn't present) would get angry, particularly if he saw her using her phone.

My initial exchange with Wu Huiying and Li Xiulan, though in many ways quite ordinary, gives concrete form to numerous abstract forces—globalization, migration, marketization, and “informatization”—that have been constitutive of China’s path of “reform and opening” (gaige kaifang) over the last three decades. As China has become integrated into the world economy, it has opened itself to global cultural flows, and new identities, life opportunities, modes of consumption, and forms of communication have arisen, yet so, too, have new types of inclusion and exclusion. Though cities like Beijing have reaped the benefits of China’s modernization efforts, many rural areas have not. For this reason, like nearly all young rural women in China today, Wu Huiying and Li Xiulan had migrated not only to work, but also to “see the world,” learn some skills, and gain some autonomy vis-à-vis parents and other authority figures back home. However, in the city labor migrants face severe constraints due to institutional forces, such as the household registration system, or hukou, which confers different and unequal forms of citizenship according to whether one’s hukou is designated urban or rural (or non-agricultural/agricultural). Even though less stringent than in the past, the discriminatory nature of the hukou policy positions rural migrants as second-class citizens in China’s towns and cities, where they also must deal with labor exploitation, deep-seated urban prejudices against migrants, and powerful regulatory discourses regarding their inferior “quality” (suzhi).

Although Wu Huiying and Li Xiulan were mobile in the sense of migrating from their home villages, like many rural-to-urban migrants in China, their long work hours, rare time off, and confined social world caused them to be relatively immobile in the city. At the same time, this immobility was overcome in certain ways by their use of mobile phones—even basic ones like Wu Huiying’s—for navigating various social networks, enjoying forms
of entertainment, participating in China’s burgeoning consumer culture, and constructing a “modern” self. For them and others like them, however, the phone could also become the locus of various struggles related to gender-, class-, age-, and place-based identities, which are rooted in structures that constrain migrants’ social mobility and individual and collective empowerment once they have journeyed to the city.

This book is about such processes of and possibilities for mobility—one physical and one virtual—in the lives of young rural-to-urban migrant women in China like Wu Huiying and Li Xiulan. More specifically, it is an ethnographic exploration of the cultural, social, aesthetic, and economic dimensions of mobile phone use by young female migrants working in the low-level service sector in Beijing. From a nation that, with few exceptions, had severely restricted population mobility prior to the early 1980s, China now has the greatest peacetime internal migration on the planet, with estimates of the number of “peasant workers” (nongmingong) or “floating population” (liudong renkou) at around 200 million. And though China’s teledensity (ratio of telephones to people) was a mere 4 percent in 1980, it now has the largest number of mobile phone subscribers and Internet users worldwide. What are the multiple meanings, habits, investments, and implications of mobile telephony in young migrant women’s everyday lives? As a study of the intersections of migration and myriad communication practices and processes, and as an examination of multiple axes of identity and modes of power, this book is about mobility as well as immobility, and it is about mobile technologies as well as “technologies of the self,” Foucault’s term for the methods of self-fashioning through which subjects are constituted. Drawing on critical/cultural and feminist theories of subjectivity, power, and technology, I theorize mobile communication and migrant women’s becoming in the city, or how social constructions of gender-, class-, age-, and place-based identities produce particular engagements with mobile technologies, which in turn reproduce and restructure these identities. Though prior research on mobile phones has looked at individual aspects of identity, such as gender, in relation to the mobile phone, none of the researchers have adapted an intersectional framework and very few have examined the co-construction of technology and subjectivity.

This book takes as its starting point the constitutive nature of communication, culture, and technology, or what James Carey has called communication as transmission and ritual. The transmission model—the more common
approach—conceives of communication as a process in which messages are sent and delivered across space for purposes of information or control. Communication as ritual, however, is connected to notions of community, belonging, and shared beliefs. To Carey, communication is “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.” Mobile phones are obviously quite convenient for message transmission—Wu Huiying did in fact send me some jokes within thirty minutes of my departure from the market. Yet equally significant is the way cell phones, as “symbols of” reality, have become key in the constitution of selfhood, friendship, and group solidarity, especially among youth populations. In this sense, the jokes and subsequent messages that Wu Huiying transmitted to me wirelessly had a much deeper meaning than providing some momentary amusement. However, as much as mobile phones can help to maintain community and a sense of belonging, they can also give rise to new disciplines and exclusions, as when Li Xiulan’s phone was confiscated. As I will show in this book, mobile phones can thus be implicated in the further marginalization of groups such as migrant workers. Carey’s definition of communication provides a basis for my examination of the breadth of practices and depth of feelings articulated to mobile phones. It also offers a way to think more deeply about how communication technology is constitutive of culture and is neither value-neutral nor an autonomous determining force.

Book-length works on the use of mobile telephony by a specific population are rare, and ethnographic inquiries that offer a holistic account of the use of mobile communication by a particular group in a particular place and time are even rarer. China’s female migrant population has been the focus of numerous studies by both Chinese and western scholars, and the use of mobile phones by southern factory workers in China has also been studied. However, in both the broader research on migrant workers and the smaller body of literature exploring their use of mobile phones, service workers in the public arena have been underexamined. Yet the contradictory nature of many migrants’ service work, where they are paradoxically isolated from others yet integrated within public spaces, has implications for the way they experience the city and use mobile communication. Amid the disjunctures, dislocations, and contradictions that characterize contemporary China, understanding how young rural-to-urban migrant women engage with mobile phones to create meaning and negotiate their lives in the city contextualizes how everyday life is increasingly constituted by and within
myriad networks of communication. It also challenges deterministic theories of technology and social change as well as those that posit universal modes of technological appropriation in an apparently flat world. Based on immersive fieldwork over a five-year period, my goal is to offer a broad, though still partial, portrait of the mutually constitutive nature of technology, subjectivity, and power. I also hope to illuminate migrant women’s socio-techno practices, or the manner in which technology, in this case a mobile phone, is integrated into prior social and cultural practices and at the same time creates new spaces or possibilities for their enactment within the specific social world and material conditions of users. Socio-techno practices are not only about what users do, but also the discourses, mental energy, and emotional desires that make up a dynamic mobile phone assemblage.

One could say that mobility—both real and imagined, in the physical and virtual realms—figures as perhaps the defining representation of our globalized world. Inside and outside China, flows of finance, people, media, and ideas (Appadurai’s “scapes”), facilitated by communication and transportation technologies, are often impervious to borders and inseparable from the transformation of individual and communal identities. However, cultural values, institutional structures, and material circumstances render experiences of mobility differently. Within the constraints characteristic of migrant workers’ lives, I argue that the mobile phone enables “immobile mobility,” which I define as a socio-techno means of surpassing spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries. Immobile mobility should not be equated with virtual reality or with those spaces entered into through a computer-simulated environment. Instead, it is grounded in the concrete practices and constraints of the everyday experiences of migrant women, and perhaps other populations that must deal with similar limitations on their control of time, space, and mobility. In using the term “immobile mobility,” I also am not emphasizing how low-income households have used cell phones as surrogate landlines that remain in the home. While immobile mobility captures the way that the mobile phone is frequently used from a fixed location (thus negating its mobile element), this is only part of its significance, albeit a very important part given migrants’ long work hours. However, as much as immobile mobility is a material socio-techno practice, it is a subjective one as well in that it enables migrant women to enter a new social space that is at once mediated and grounded in the circumstances of their daily lives. Certain socio-techno practices that enable immobile mobility can be
understood as enacting resistance, insofar as through such practices migrant women refuse the material conditions that work to limit their sense of themselves and the goals they can achieve. However, other practices may possibly reify migrant women’s marginalization. In other words, immobile mobility has a dual logic—it can be liberating and constraining, creating new opportunities for empowerment and disempowerment.

As the term “immobile mobility” implies, the circumstances under which mobile phones are used by young migrant women differ from the “digital natives,” or those youth and young adults who have always been surrounded by digital technologies, such as computers and video-game consoles, dial-up and then broadband Internet access, cell phones, digital music players, and, more recently, e-readers, tablet computers, and the like. These young people’s various engagements with new media are constitutive of what Henry Jenkins calls “convergence culture,” or the numerous social, cultural, economic, and technological transformations that have given rise to the intersection of old and new media, the circulation of content through many media platforms, and a participatory culture that often blurs the boundaries between media producers and consumers.

What socio-techno practices associated with convergence arise among those much less privileged than the “born digital”? In other words, what happens when users aren’t surrounded by a plethora of digital devices; that is, when a cell phone is not supplementing a landline (at least during its initial diffusion), when a camera phone is the first camera one has ever owned, when one does not have a personal computer or Internet connection at home, and when the “mobile Internet” is, if not one’s first exposure to the Internet, nonetheless the primary means of access? For those who study convergence among more privileged users, there is a tendency to downplay its technological aspect, or the way one device can increasingly handle numerous media functions. However, millions of people in the world must make do with a single delivery technology for most of their digital media use, and almost always it is a mobile phone. Thus, in contrast to what I will term “selective convergence”—such as when a person intentionally chooses to use convergent functions on one device, as in the case of transferring songs from a desktop computer to a phone, or when, for the sake of convenience, a smartphone is used to check email while out of the office or to take a picture because a digital camera was left at home—young migrant women’s technology use is often characterized by necessary convergence, or the converging of
multiple usages on a single device out of necessity because no other device is owned or because the device in one’s possession has limited functionality. A young migrant woman taking a picture of a movie star on a television screen, because she either does not have Internet capability on her phone or cannot afford mobile Internet service, is an example of such necessary convergence.

A notion of necessary convergence is not meant to highlight technological convergence while denying culture; rather, it is quite the opposite. Though for more privileged users “the hardware [is] diverging while the content converges,”22 for marginalized groups like young migrant women both hardware and content must converge on the same device. As this book goes to press, those “born digital” are increasingly utilizing converging functions on one device, yet for the opposite reasons that young migrant women engage in necessary convergence. For the former, such a choice is the result of being able to afford superior technology that has recently been developed. For migrant women, necessary convergence is often characterized by both economic constraints and subpar technology. Necessary convergence thus reveals how people evince creativity to fulfill their needs and desires within limited material circumstances.

Both “new media technologies” and “contemporary China” are perhaps two of the most dynamic and rapidly changing formations on the planet. In offering a “living record” of young migrant women’s engagement with mobile phones I trace patterns over time and also paint a portrait of a “moment in time” with the broader goal of contributing analytically and theoretically to our understanding of how marginalized groups engage with new media technologies amid myriad constraints.23 A study of young rural-to-urban migrant women’s socio-techno practices addresses a wide range of issues salient within research on contemporary China, migration, mobile telephony, and cultural approaches to technology appropriation. To set the context for the remainder of this book, in the following pages I situate the themes of this study within broader theoretical issues relevant to a cultural study of young migrant women and mobile technology. More specifically, I first consider how diverse modes of power and forms of self-fashioning manifest in contemporary China. I then discuss technology as articulation and assemblage as a theoretical framework for this study. These larger theoretical discussions are followed by an overview of mobile telephony studies in a global context in order to show how this book complements such research and charts new terrain. The necessity of attending to gender, class, place, and
age is then illuminated through unpacking a commonly used term for young rural-to-urban migrant women, *dagongmei* ("working little sister"). I close with a brief discussion of my location as a feminist ethnographer.

Contemporary China: Subjectivity and Technologies of the Self

China is in the midst of a modernizing project in which the radical socialist utopian vision of Mao Zedong has been replaced by a pragmatic Party leadership that advocates "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Egalitarianism, collectivism, and asceticism have been repudiated in favor of neoliberal market policies that emphasize individual merit, material wealth, and consumption. The ideology of the Communist Party has been nearly completely undermined, and with it its moral authority, yet it maintains legitimacy through delivering economic growth and an improved standard of living for the nation's people. Whereas during the Mao era the pursuit of material wealth was scorned, now "money is god." In the midst of such ruptures, alternative values and lifestyles compete for people's attention, often within a mediated realm of representation. Indeed, certain socialist institutions and ideologies have been decoupled from their prior cultural and political significance, and in many ways the heavy hand of the government has retreated from people's daily lives. However, such new modes of individuality and privatization coexist with an authoritarian state that has exerted tremendous effort toward the social engineering (*shehui gongcheng*) of its citizens, in particular migrant workers.

Understanding the contemporary Chinese milieu can be facilitated through the notion of governmentality, which Michel Foucault defines broadly as the "conduct of conduct," or the underlying rationalities, tactics, and actions of various actors and institutions for the purpose of improving the prosperity, security, and well-being of both the state and the individual, as well as how individuals are integrated into and comply with these rationalities. Governmentality thus encompasses both how to "govern others" and how to "govern oneself." As Elaine Jeffreys and Gary Sigley note, the concept of governmentality focuses not on the exercise of power by the state for the sake of control, but on "the diversity of forces and knowledges involved in efforts to regulate the lives of individuals, and the conditions within particular national territories, in pursuit of various goals." Although it was originally put forth as a means of analyzing the transformations occurring
in post–World War II western liberal democratic societies, governmentality’s applicability to non-western countries that are undergoing their own economic restructuring and market liberalization in line with global capitalist imperatives has been argued by many. Thus, while “Chinese governmentality” might not emphasize rights and liberty, it nonetheless involves both a “facilitative” dimension—or the “notion of free individuals pursuing their own interest”—and an “authoritarian” dimension—or norms that “become obligatory and enforceable” through state efforts of planning and administration.

Governmentality is not only a way to understand the rationalities of the state or other institutional authorities, but it also illuminates how seemingly personal choices and lifestyles are shaped by these rationalities. Emphasizing this personal domain, Nikolas Rose argues that individuals are encouraged to be “entrepreneurs of themselves” through maximizing their capacities and striving for self-improvement. This “enterprising self” encompasses an ethical dimension as well, where ethics “are understood in a ‘practical’ way as modes of evaluating and acting upon one’s self.” A key aspect of governmentality therefore involves what Foucault calls “technologies of the self,” which “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”

Though governmentality accounts for the state’s role in guidance of the populace and forming consensus, or “governing from a distance,” in focusing on technologies of the self, Foucault stresses that he is most interested in “how an individual acts upon himself.” Technologies of the self thus underscore how “freedom” is woven into modes of “self-responsibilization” as the state has retracted from some of its prior obligations to its citizens.

In China, technologies of power and technologies of the self manifest in what Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang call “socialism from afar,” where Chinese citizens are encouraged to become “self-animating” subjects within “the political limits set by the socialist state.” Clearly, the Chinese government has invested tremendous energy toward “conducting the conduct” of all of its citizens, for example, through encouraging entrepreneurship, on the one hand, and undertaking numerous media campaigns that promote a harmonious, “civilized” society on the other. For example, for several years all over
Beijing and all across China various forms of propaganda have urged citizens to build “civilized” lives, communities, and transportation, to engage in “civilized” behavior or service, and to use “civilized” language (see figure 1). However, as an extremely marginalized population with supposed low “quality” (suzhi), rural-to-urban migrants are governed in particular ways, such as through propaganda aimed at making them more “cultured,” hygiene and family planning endeavors, vocational training programs, and workplace disciplines. Yan Hairong has argued that recruitment of poor rural women for urban domestic service, which is framed in official discourse as a way for these women to improve their suzhi by gaining a “social education” in the city, is a form of neoliberal governmentality. In my conversations with Wu Huiying, Li Xiulan, and dozens of other young migrant women who had left home without a formal intermediary, migration decisions were most often framed as a personal choice (though one usually impelled by difficult conditions at home). However, rural-to-urban migration in China is both a result of and requirement for China’s development, and thus these women’s oft-stated goals of “developing” themselves and learning new skills can be
understood as forms of self-entrepreneurship in line with the party-state’s modernization imperatives.

As I will show, a recognition of such modes of governmentality that shape subjectivity has important implications for analyzing migrant women’s engagement with mobile phones. Just as Sun Wanning in *Maid in China* has argued that China’s mass media operate as a “technology of subjectivity” for domestic workers, so, too, I show that mobile phones are literal and figu-

rative “technologies of the self” for young migrant women. As cell phones are articulated to notions of modernity, urbanity, femininity, and sociality, they are constitutive of migrant women’s subjectification, or how they recognize themselves as subjects in the city. In both the waged and emotional labor expended in buying and using the phone, they are also part of what Foucault calls the “care of the self” as well. As a “mobile technology” in multiple senses of the term, mobile phones are also implicated in powerful contemporary Chinese discourses of self-improvement through acquisition of skills—technological, linguistic, “civilizing”—that migrant women internalize, enact, and reproduce via the mobile phone. In certain cases, when migrant women use mobile phones to resist employers’ attempts at control, the phone also becomes entangled in vectors of disciplinary power.

While the ascendance of “governmental” power is sometimes thought to sweep away the notion of a “disciplinary society,” as I will argue, depending on the context, disciplinary power can still operate with force in the lives of young migrant women. Women’s bodies have been shown to be the site of numerous configurations of power, and this is even truer for female migrants, who are disciplined through multifarious regulatory regimes and discourses. Though migrant women, like all Chinese citizens, are compelled to self-manage and optimize their capacities, in the workplace they are also often subject to managerial techniques aimed at molding them into “doc-

ile” bodies through instilling a self-regulatory gaze. Thus, rather than seeing governmentality and disciplinary power as two distinct forms of power separated by time and space, I will show that they both still function to produce subjects, with one having more force than the other under certain conditions. As mobile phones are articulated to diverse forms of power, they can be emancipatory but they can also be enslaving. In the lives of young migrant women, for communicative and symbolic purposes and in consistent and contradictory ways, the phone can often become the nexus for various practices and techniques of power.
Theorizing Mobile Technologies: Technology as Articulation and Assemblage

How does one capture the multiple logics, discourses, and power relations within which contingent uses and understandings of mobile technologies by young migrant women emerge and take flight? From its inception, the interdisciplinary and international nature of mobile phone research has meant that scholars have approached this matter from a number of different angles and theoretical perspectives. For example, some have drawn upon general notions of the mutual shaping of society and technology. Others have used domestication theory, originally conceived as a way to understand the stages through which domestic technologies such as personal computers are introduced into the “moral economy” of the household. When this theory has been applied to studies of mobile telephony, however, quite often it must be supplemented by other theoretical frameworks to be able to account for the diverse locations in which mobile phones are used, the vast array of user practices, and the multiple meanings ascribed to mobile phones across space and time.

As useful as these approaches are, very few mobile phone studies are grounded in critical or cultural studies of technology. Noting this gap, Gerard Goggin applies the “circuit of culture” in his comprehensive analysis of the rise of “cell phone culture.” Originally devised by du Gay and colleagues to understand the Sony Walkman, the circuit of culture posits five processes—production, consumption, representation, regulation, and identity—that must be considered to fully understand a cultural artifact. Like domestication theory, however, the circuit of culture is inadequate to fully account for the cell phone as a networked technology. Goggin therefore also uses actor-network theory (ANT), which refuses binary oppositions between technology and society, and considers the agency of both human and non-human actors in how a technology is shaped. A significant critique of ANT, which Goggin acknowledges, is its inattention to gender and power.

Mobile communication scholarship thus far has generated knowledge about the deep and extensive manner in which mobile phones have been incorporated into social and cultural life. Because my concern is with the mutual constitution of technology, power, and subjectivity, to theorize mobile phone practices I utilize the concepts of articulation and assemblage, which have most often been associated with Stuart Hall and the work of Gilles
Deleuze and Félix Guattari, respectively, but have been taken up by numerous critical and cultural scholars as a framework for theorizing, among other things, the social world, neoliberalism in primarily non-western contexts, feminist theories of the body, and the dynamic and interwoven relationship between culture and technology. In my use of articulation and assemblage, I draw on this diverse scholarship, in particular that of Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise, who, in their individual and collaborative work, have employed articulation and assemblage to capture the fact of technology as not just a bounded “thing” but as existing within and interdependent with a number of “energies, activities, interpenetrations, and investments.”

An articulation, as defined by Stuart Hall, can best be understood as a connection of different components that become unified under particular conditions. In other words, it “is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time.” The theory of articulation draws attention to myriad connections among distinct elements—ideologies, social groups, practices—that appear to create a unified discourse. However, articulations are always contingent on a range of factors in a specific historical conjuncture. The elements articulated can never be assumed to have a necessary correspondence (they could be quite different), yet their unity is also not completely random. For example, when mobile phones first became popular in the United States in the early 1980s, they were primarily viewed as a tool for elite businessmen and were articulated to notions of wealth, convenience, productivity, and upper-class and upper-middle-class white-collar labor, among other things. During the 1990s when youth in Western Europe and Japan began acquiring mobile phones, new articulations emerged, especially as text messaging became a distinct youth practice.

Investigating such diverse articulations means “mapping the context,” not only to locate a phenomenon—technological or otherwise—within a certain context at a certain time, but also to understand what distinct phenomena make this context what it is. This context, or “web” of articulations, is then what makes up an assemblage, which can be viewed as a dynamic network in which heterogeneous elements—bodies, technologies, desires, discourses, disciplines, signs—are articulated, or joined together. In other words, they are not separate and distinct but function within and through one another. Moreover, assemblages create territories that have particular qualities, claims, and potentialities. As Wise notes, while an assemblage is “not a set of predetermined parts,” it also is not a “random collection of things” because “there
is a sense that an assemblage is a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims a territory. However, assemblages are not stable; they become deterritorialized, or shift and change, only to be reterritorialized, or reassembled into a different shape with different elements. In the case of a mobile phone, there is the actual physical object as well as its articulated elements, including ideas, practices, and emotions; how these take a particular dynamic form, or constellation, constitutes the phone’s assemblage. This assemblage will thus include human and non-human bodies, actions, feelings, and statements, which are not static but are involved in processes of assembly and disassembly, which then lead to new articulations emerging within a revised assemblage.

My purpose in viewing technology as articulation and assemblage is not to get lost in theoretical abstraction. Rather, in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari and echoing the words of Elizabeth Grosz, I take articulation and assemblage as tools to be utilized, shaped, developed, and experimented with. These tools should help illuminate the mutually constitutive nature of technology and culture and the multiple practices, values, meanings, and emotions that make up young rural-to-urban migrant women’s engagement with mobile phones. As Ong notes in her study of neoliberalism in non-western contexts, using articulation and assemblage places the emphasis not on predetermined grand narratives of global societal transformation but rather allows “conceptual openness to unexpected possibilities and resolutions” in the way in which terms, discourses, and practices emerge and are negotiated within a specific conjuncture. In a similar manner, I wish to avoid taken-for-granted understandings of mobile phone use that have emerged among populations quite distinct from young rural-to-urban migrant women. Mapping the territory of migrant women’s mobile phone assemblage means looking not only at the mobile phone itself, but also to the flow of relationships within which it is given meaning as well as its power to “assemble specific bodies, passions, and representations in particular ways.” Such a perspective in its very formulation considers issues of subjectivity, agency, and, crucially, power.

Mobile Communication in a Global Context

My interest in this project began during a return visit to China in 2002, the same year Wu Huiying’s sister purchased her bronze-colored Nokia phone.
After living, studying, and working in China in much of the early to mid-1990s, I had been away for a while and was on a long-anticipated return visit. The changes in Beijing’s physical infrastructure—new ring roads packed with cars and a formerly unimaginable array of shopping malls, restaurants, and bars—were dramatic. However, what left the most indelible mark on me was the ubiquity of mobile phones in a nation where until rather recently having a personal landline was the reserve of a privileged minority.

Right around this time, some of the first mobile phone studies had been published by Mizuko Ito, Rich Ling, James Katz, and others who were examining how this “personal, portable” technology was becoming a central artifact for identity construction and social networking, especially among youth populations. With few exceptions, however, the subjects of these studies were usually educated, comparatively well-off, urban teenagers and college students in developed countries. It thus raised the question—what about mobile phone use by more economically or socially marginalized young people, like China’s young adult rural-to-urban migrants, who face extreme limits on their agency and autonomy? How do they use mobile phones in their everyday lives, which are characterized by numerous structural and material constraints?

Since I first began asking these questions, the field of mobile phone studies has developed quickly, as scholars from multiple disciplines and in diverse geographic locations have contributed to a growing body of research on the various social and personal dimensions of mobile telephony. Outside of China, such work has focused on how mobile phones lend themselves to the dislodging of space, the blurring of time, and more flexibility and fluidity in coordinating schedules. In emotionally close relationships mobile phones are said to enable “ambient virtual co-presence” or the “tethered self,” and teens and young adults especially use mobile phones for forms of “digital gift giving.” At a more individual level, the mobile phone has been shown to be connected to fashion, personal identity, and modes of self-presentation. Gendered discourses, differences in display, and types of usage of mobile phones have also been found. Larissa Hjorth, in particular, has focused on gender performativity via mobile phones through mapping “cartographies of personalization” of gendered mobile media in Asia. While many of the studies cited above have investigated mobile phone use of middle-class users, in particular high school and college students, with few exceptions the focus in China has been primarily on rural-to-urban migrant
workers, especially those laboring in the nation’s southern factories. Just as migrants in transnational contexts keep in touch with friends and family via mobile phones, China’s rural-to-urban migrants maintain translocal networks via cell phones and use them to establish new friendships and romantic relationships. Moreover, there seems to be a consensus that migrant workers use mobiles as key signifiers of status (which I will question in chapter 2), yet there is less agreement on how effective mobile phones are for job seeking and helping migrants to raise their incomes. In his analysis of the “information have-less,” which includes rural-to-urban migrant workers, Jack Linchuan Qiu has examined their use of “working-class ICTs,” such as inexpensive mobile phones, prepaid phone cards, text messaging, and Internet cafés. In his mapping of the interconnection between social differentiation and informational stratification, Qiu is one of the few who puts class at the forefront of his analysis of institutions, discourses, and practices in order to reveal how a “working-class network society” is emerging in China.

Technology Use and Social Differentiation

As a whole, this body of research in and outside of China has significantly deepened our understanding of how the mobile phone has become part of everyday life in a variety of contexts. However, within the fields of mobile phone studies and migration scholarship more generally and as they intersect in China more specifically, there are still important questions that remain unanswered. For example, how is social differentiation and subjectivity constitutive of disparate access to, understandings of, and meaning-making practices around technology? Feminist studies of technology—often focused on white western women—have shown the reciprocal, fluid, and contingent manner in which gender and technology shape one another, be it through sexual divisions in the workforce, gendered uses of technology, or technology’s role in forming gendered bodies. However, as Leopoldina Fortunati notes about mobile communication studies, although gendered dimensions of mobile phone use have been described, rarely has such work problematized how gender and technology are co-constructed, nor has it examined how particular material conditions produce distinct uses of technology. An exception is Hjorth’s work on how the mobile phone has been domesticated in line with gendered and local identities in the Asia-Pacific region, yet a gap...
remains in research on this area in the People’s Republic of China. Moreover, while in both academic and popular accounts, the trope of the young Asian female has emerged as an urban, sexy, tech-savvy consumer of new media, this construction inadvertently creates a false totality, leaving out a large segment of young women, including rural-to-urban migrants, whose limited material circumstances and use of “have-less” technology confines them to the margins of imaginations of “Asia.”

My goal, therefore, is to build on and extend such work by shifting the focus from primarily urban, western, or Asian middle-class and upper-middle-class girls and women in school or in the workforce to a group of young Chinese women considered to be at the margins of society and thus in possession of less social, cultural, and economic capital. In so doing, I illuminate fine nuances in the ways that gendered uses of, and discourses about, technology are produced and circulated within contemporary China. Not only gender, however, but also race and class are central to discursive constructions and appropriations of media technologies, as numerous cultural studies of technology have shown. Yet, in the Chinese context, as I will discuss in more detail below, “place” is often a more salient category than race or ethnicity.

While research on rural-to-urban migrant workers’ uses of mobile phones has emphasized the urban-rural divide in China, in general the same critique leveled by Fortunati regarding research on gender and the mobile phone could also be applied to issues of class; that is, in researchers’ descriptive focus (except in Qiu’s work mentioned above), they take class as a given rather than analyzing how technology and class are co-produced. Although I will show in this book that gender is indeed a salient force, I also argue for the necessity of looking at how the intersections of gender as well as class, place (e.g., the rural “Other”), and age produce migrant women’s subjectivity and engagement with technology.

Who Are the “Global Youth”?

The young Asian female and the western, urban, middle-class youth who have figured so prominently in mobile phone scholarship were the ones who were most likely early on to have access to mobile telephony once it diffused and even now to have the financial means to keep up with the latest technological advances. Researching their technology use is important, yet the
inordinate focus upon them ignores a vast swath of youth and young adults around the world and intentionally or not perpetuates a view of “global youth culture” that corresponds with the objectives of transnational corporations and marketers.\textsuperscript{80} Clearly “youth” is a slippery term that takes on divergent meanings in different places, as many have noted.\textsuperscript{81} In terms of age, various definitions of youth coexist. Some define youth as the teenage years, while the United Nations designates youth as those aged between fifteen and twenty-four. In China, youth is defined as those aged fifteen to twenty-nine.\textsuperscript{82}

Aside from age, however, there seems to be a broad consensus that rather than view youth as a distinct stage, it should instead be seen as a context-dependent process, or “social achievement,” that is produced by numerous actors, institutions, and discourses and is “bound up with questions of power and materiality.”\textsuperscript{83}

It is certainly true that the young women in my study do not fit neatly into the dominant notion of global youth culture, which currently means tech-savvy, brand-conscious youth with loosely shared experiences of schooling and negotiating parental authority, and with a degree of leisure time, disposable income, and interest in certain forms of popular culture. Such youth prevail in media representations and in much of the literature on “digital natives.”\textsuperscript{84} They also figure prominently in the imaginations of global corporations eager to capture a young, lucrative market in China. For example, in her study of advertising in China, Jing Wang has detailed how feminine products are marketed to the “new modern girl” as well as how Motorola erroneously assumed that western signifiers of cool “global youth,” such as indie music, could be utilized in the marketing of mobile music to Chinese youth.\textsuperscript{85} Though migrant youth might not be the trendsetters that global marketers lust after, they nonetheless are often attracted to the allures of consumption, because one’s consumption level in China is supposed to denote not only one’s economic capital, but also one’s cultural capital and “quality.” Young migrant women may not have much time to “mess around” and “geek out” with new media technologies like their more privileged peers in the West; nonetheless, their engagement with mobile phones is central to their experience in the city.\textsuperscript{86}

If we acknowledge that youth is marked by a range of concerns of young people in diverse contexts, then we must also allow that it is not only media and marketers, or parents and teachers—the authority figures so central to dominant constructions of youth—that produce people as “youth.” Surrogate
forms of power operate with similar effects in places like China, where patriar-archal familial norms, disciplines, and notions of female docility infiltrate the workplace, thereby placing migrant workers within “parent‒child” relationships. In most mobile phone research, however, power has been remarkably undertheorized. In the few studies that have explicitly analyzed power relations, power is viewed as something repressive and resting in the hands of authority figures such as parents or teachers; the phone is then constructed as an emancipatory device. One of my central concerns, however, is to theorize how modes of power and discourse are articulated to and constitute mobile technologies and mobile bodies. It is to one particular mobile body that I now turn.

China’s Dagongmei: Gender, Age, Class, and Place

In contemporary China, the cultural shifts in goals, values, possibilities, and opportunities discussed earlier have not only given rise to diverse forms of power, but also affect the way in which citizens are encouraged to be “self-animating subjects.” On the one hand, in leaving the land, young rural-to-urban migrant women have greater opportunities for personal agency and autonomy than previous generations of rural women. On the other hand, they are simultaneously positioned within numerous cultural and structural constraints, such as the rigid hukou (or household registration system), salary differentials, status- and gender-stratified labor realms, and complex and contradictory discourses that are mapped onto their bodies. Theorizing their mobile phone assemblage thus necessitates considering how all of these forces intersect. In transnational contexts, feminist scholars have long recognized the importance of the intersections of multiple axes of identity, such as gender, class, and race, as constitutive of shaping migration experience. An intersectional framework thus offers a means of breaking away from the privileging of one aspect of identity over another in order to avoid distortions and exclusions. Such a lens considers more than just how discrete, static categories of identity are interconnected; it also shows how they are always in play, even if at different moments one might be more important in shaping experience than another. The significance of the intersections of gender, age, class, and place in this study can be demonstrated through unpacking a commonly used Chinese term for migrant women—dagongmei.
A highly gendered term, *dagongmei* combines the words “work” (*dagong*) and little sister (*mei*), and it means “working little sister” or “maiden worker.” *Dagongmei* connotes a young, unmarried woman, who, as a younger “sister,” has low status and few rights. Pun Ngai notes that *dagongmei* “implies an inferior working identity inscribed with capitalist labor relations and sexual relations.” Dagongmei has more powerful gendered connotations in the context of Chinese familial patriarchy—young migrant women are “working little sisters”—while young migrant men are simply laborers, but not “little brothers.” This distinction has implications for the jobs into which migrant women are funneled: domestic, service, and sex work as well as industrial work that perpetuates the “myth of nimble fingers.” According to Ching Kwan Lee, managers and bosses in southern Chinese factories who employ *dagongmei* often view them as “like lambs, very pure and compliant” and merely girls who work “while waiting to be married off.”

The construction of *dagongmei* as little working sisters waiting for marriage highlights how their age is also central to their subjectification in the city. As Tamara Jacka notes, especially for women, marriage “marks the entry into the social order . . . whatever position migrant women occupy in the city, it is seen as only temporary—their ‘real’ adult status begins when they return to the countryside, ‘settle down,’ and become wives and mothers.” Their position as young women thus contributes to their liminality in the city. Though they are seen as neither children nor full-fledged adults, some employers nevertheless feel justified in treating them as children, paying them less, and in some cases, subjecting them to rigorous workplace disciplines. Moreover, their journey to the city is nearly a rite of passage, constitutive of their age, their desire to broaden their horizons, and, for those from the poorest regions, their view that the countryside offers nothing. In Yan Hairong’s words, “‘youth’ is therefore a strategic site of action” and migration is a “troubled process of subject formation for rural youth” because the city is the only place where they can gain a modern subjectivity. To call them “youth,” then, “foregrounds age not as a trajectory, but as identity” and emphasizes “the here-and-now of young people’s experience, the social and cultural practices through which they shape their worlds.”
Beyond gender and youth, the term *dagongmei* also evokes a low-status labor category. This “inferior working identity” noted by Pun above is clearly evident when contrasting the term *dagongmei* (and *dagongzai*) with *gongren*, the Mao-era term for worker. Prior to the economic reforms, the *gongren* were the highly privileged class of urban workers, the “masters” of the nation employed in state or collective enterprises and as such entitled to numerous lifelong social welfare benefits. In contrast, the *dagongmei* and *dagongzai* have minimal rights and virtually no job security. Like the low-skilled “precariat” around the globe, they thus represent a class of workers indicative of a capitalist market that extracts surplus labor. As China has joined the global market, migrant workers, as always temporary workers, provide the “flexibility” demanded by late capitalism. In the context of China’s marketization and globalization, the term *dagongmei* has emerged as a classificatory strategy that enables the exploitation of workers in the name of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (my emphasis added). Such restructuring of labor relations is, according to Pun, “the subsumption of class analysis in order to hide class positions and social privileges,” and as such it is part of a political strategy designed to support a neoliberal discourse of open markets and individualism.

Finally, a *dagongmei* is not only young, gendered, and classed; she is also “placed.” She is an unskilled, low-paid female worker, and she is also, and must be, from rural China. For this reason, her location in the urban environment greatly differs from a woman who is a city resident. Even if they happen to hold the same job, which is extremely rare, their positions in asymmetrical networks of power and opportunity mean that they will experience the city and their employment very differently. I will explore the origins and consequences of this urban-rural divide more fully in chapter 1. Here I only wish to point out that in contemporary China, because development policies since the mid-1980s have focused on the eastern coastal regions and large urban centers, the countryside, particularly in less well-off provinces, has increasingly been positioned as “left behind” or, in Yan's words, as “a wasteland of ‘backwardness’ and ‘tradition.’” This teleological view of the city as the vanguard of progress and development is not unique to China, nor is the urban-rural dichotomy a recent result of post-Mao reforms. However, as China has set itself on a course to “catch up” and “develop,” the “quality” (*suzhi*) of the people has been seen as central to improving the quality of the nation. The countryside and peasants, then, become objectified as lacking
quality, and peasants are seen as the backward, traditional Other against which progress and development can be measured. Such a blanket assessment places the origin and perpetuation of this “social reality” onto the geographic domain of the countryside and the mental and physical bodies of its inhabitants rather than structural and institutional factors that discursively produce these conditions.

In sum, dagongmei is a subject position produced by structural, cultural, and social factors that rely on dominant discourses of gender, age, class, and place. It thus operates as a form of power to normalize the exploitative conditions faced by migrant women and their low position in the gender and societal hierarchy. However, like all identity categories, the term dagongmei is a social construction and a false totality and one that can never be completely fixed. Nonetheless, it illuminates the necessity of employing an intersectional framework to understand the socio-techno practices of young migrant women, how these practices are characterized by immobile mobility, and how they are constitutive of migrant women’s subjectification in the city.

Feminist Ethnography

To map migrant women’s mobile phone assemblage, this study used immersive, ethnographic methods. The goal was to generate what Clifford Geertz calls a “thick description” through a logic of discovery. My research began in the summer of 2005, and the bulk of the fieldwork was conducted for ten months during 2006 and 2007. This initial fieldwork was supplemented by follow-up trips of varying lengths from 2008 to 2011, as well as email, online chat, and phone calls with key informants. The participants in the study were primarily young migrant women, as well as a small number of migrant men, from rural villages and a few towns in various provinces in China. They had usually migrated to Beijing after finishing at least some junior middle school and were employed as low-wage workers mainly in marketplaces, restaurants, and beauty salons though a few worked as service staff in government-owned companies. In addition to participant observation at worksites and residences, I conducted numerous semistructured interviews and gathered a small number of mobile phone diaries from key informants. I also analyzed Chinese internal migration and telecommunications policy, media representations of rural-to-urban migrants, and advertising discourses of mobile phone companies (see the appendix for more details on the research methods).
This research is based in ethnography, but by now it goes without saying that using the term “ethnography” raises questions about the problematic nature of cultural representation and a reliance on experience to generate truth. The critiques of ethnography are multiple, valid, and by now well known.\textsuperscript{104} James Clifford notes that in ethnography there are always exclusions, unintentional distortions, the inevitable speaking for the other, and the imposition of meaning.\textsuperscript{105} As a feminist ethnographer, I sought constant self-reflexivity and to let my participants speak of their own lives and experiences.\textsuperscript{106} At the same time, I am not positing a self-knowing, authentic subject that can speak the truth of her real situation through language. Years ago Joan Scott addressed the problem with relying on experience as “uncontestable evidence,” particularly to illuminate the lives of marginalized groups.\textsuperscript{107} As Scott argues, experience cannot simply be taken at face value; instead, an investigation of a group’s experience must always include an analysis of how difference is socially constructed and constituted by discourse, and how discourses function to produce experience in specific, historical conjunctures. Rather than looking at the products of difference, we must analyze the way power operates to produce subjects through discourse. Such an assertion does not deny human agency, yet this agency is never fully free. Acknowledging the socially constructed nature of experience means we can still maintain it as a mode for understanding because it is the primary way we know our own and others’ ways of being in the world.\textsuperscript{108} It is a means of tapping into people’s understanding of their place in the world, the practices that anchor (or disrupt) this position, and the feelings and emotions attached to such practices and positions.

Perhaps the biggest problems that remain with ethnography are power differentials between researcher and “subjects” as well as the potential for othering and essentializing of these subjects. My own background as a white, middle-class, American scholar perhaps could not be further removed from that of the women in this study, many of whom came from extremely poor families and often did not have more than a middle-school education (many had less). At the same time, they were experts on the topic I was studying. I can also only hope that my own instances of being “othered” in China—in particular while living in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and being heckled, cheated, pointed at, and occasionally touched, depending on where I was—gave me greater empathy to the situation of migrant women.
in Beijing. I do not mean to downplay my position of privilege compared to migrant women, who in the city are treated as outsiders, though in their own country. And certainly our relationships were framed by issues of class, race, nationality, and unequal access to social and cultural capital. Yet, for all of these reasons I was also somewhat of an object of curiosity for them. Reflecting on such situations, Wendy Weiss notes, “There is objectification on both sides, which is part of the process of understanding begun by defining ourselves first through the opposition of ‘the other.’”

This process of understanding proceeds through dialogue, exploration, and what the Chinese call *huxiang bangzhu*, or “mutual help.” As much as the women in this study gave to me—of their time, knowledge, friendship, and even handmade gifts—I hope I also gave back to them, through helping them with their limited English, occasionally serving as a translator with customers, taking them out to a special meal, and, most important, showing them respect and that their lives mattered.

Julie Bettie notes in the introduction to her study of Mexican American and white girls in an American high school that to perform reflexive ethnography means recognizing that the text “is not simply the result of an even negotiation between ethnographer and subject, because in the end authority literally remains with the ethnographer, as *author* of the text.” In other words, regardless of my desire to let women’s voices speak in this study, and for them to articulate their own understanding of what mobile phones mean in their lives, ultimately the final interpretation is mine. Nonetheless, I hope the end result is what Donna Haraway calls a “joining of partial views.”

Feminist ethnography is not “feminist” because it is conducted by women who, as women, have certain inherent traits. Instead, it is based on an acknowledgment of power relations, a desire to let silenced voices speak, intersubjectivity between researcher and participants, and, perhaps most crucially, reflexivity. Thus, the politics of ethnography cannot be erased, nor should they be. For it is ethnography’s politics that forces recognition and negotiation of issues of power and difference, and by extension potential realizations of social change.

Overview of the Book

In this book I explore young rural-to-urban migrant women’s uses of mobile phones as these are constitutive of these women’s urban subjectivity. The
research is situated within the processes of China’s marketization and entry into the global economy, and the concomitant forces of modernization, migration, and informatization. It examines how the intersections of gender, class, place, and age produce particular socio-techno practices characterized by immobile mobility. After a chapter that provides background for the non-China expert, the remaining chapters illuminate the cultural, social, aesthetic, and economic dimensions that map the territory of migrant women’s engagement with mobile phones.

Chapter 1 outlines the specific socio-cultural context of contemporary China at the beginning of the 21st century. To set the stage for the rest of the book, this chapter discusses the reforms of the post-Mao period, the history of the urban-rural divide perpetuated by the hukou (household registration system), and the phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration. I examine China’s discourse of development and modernity and how it configures rural women ideologically as an “Other” to be reformed and improved, as shown most explicitly through a discussion of the suzhi discourse. I also discuss two “revolutions” in China: the “consumer revolution” that began in the 1980s and the rapid development of China’s telecommunications infrastructure, which led to the diffusion of new media technologies in everyday urban life. Throughout the discussion I emphasize how shifting ideologies related to gender, class, and place have played a pivotal role in shaping rural women’s experience, during both the Mao-era planned economy and China’s reform-era embrace of markets and global capitalism.

In chapter 2 I situate the mobile phone specifically within China’s quest for development and modernity. After a discussion of “alternative” modernities, I show how in 2006–2007 a mobile phone was an important signifier of urban modernity for rural women. I also argue that the mobile phone is a technology of the self that is articulated to self-shaping as well as disciplines and exclusions. In addition, I illustrate how cell phones allow women to participate in a form of consumer citizenship (or the “comfortable life” promised by the government) in contrast to the legal and social citizenship they are denied in the city. Another key point in this chapter is that discourses surrounding mobile phone use align with notions of gender essentialism that have become prominent in the post-Mao era. In the final section of the chapter, I explore more deeply the constitutive nature of gender and technology by presenting an in-depth case study of a beauty salon.
In chapter 3 I examine young rural-to-urban migrant women's use of mobile phones for expanding and enriching various types of social relationships. I situate this discussion within Chinese concepts of selfhood and guanxi (relationship) and relate these to Pierre Bourdieus notion of social capital. A key question thus explored throughout the chapter is whether migrant women's mobile-enabled networked sociality enables them to build their social capital in ways that will improve their life conditions. In discussing how more and more migrant women access the Internet via their mobile phones, I also introduce the concept of “necessary convergence.” A final theme explored is the way that mobile phones allow for greater autonomy in dating. A key point of this chapter is that while immobile mobility allows migrant women inclusion in expanded and enriched social networks, these tend to reinforce their identity as migrants, or “not Beijing people.”

Chapter 4 builds on the notions of immobile mobility and necessary convergence through examining migrant women's uses of camera phones. For nearly all of the informants in this study, a camera phone was the first camera they had ever owned. Though many women involved in the initial fieldwork did not have cameras in their phones due to financial reasons, those who did manifested creativity in asserting a personal digital aesthetic. In this chapter, I engage with theories of imaging and photography in order to discuss how migrant women use camera phones to represent the world, construct the self, transcend limited circumstances, envisage new possibilities, and plan for the future. I argue that such imaging practices are ultimately about self-making and actively deploying the imagination. The chapter concludes that in using camera phones to both represent and construct reality, migrant women exercise individual agency and engage in efforts at personal transformation, which is a first step toward societal change.

As with chapter 4, chapter 5 continues to elaborate the notions of immobile mobility and necessary convergence through analyzing mobile phones and labor politics. I first examine whether mobile phones can enhance migrant women's economic opportunities, such as by helping them to find a better job or increase their income. I also show how employers utilize mobile phones for purposes of surveillance and how migrant women use mobile phones as tools of resistance. This chapter argues that despite their use of mobile phones, migrant women remain relatively immobile in the labor sphere.
In the conclusion I tie together the various themes and provide a final analysis of the diverse practices, understandings, and investments that make up young migrant women's mobile phone assemblage. I avoid an “either/or” empowerment versus subjugation argument and instead summarize how a focus on the articulation of various socio-techno practices provides a more nuanced account of the co-construction of technology and subjectivity.