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**Conference Paper**

## 160 characters for change: China's mobile urban-rural divide

8th International Telecommunications Society (ITS) Asia-Pacific Regional Conference, Taiwan, 26 - 28 June, 2011: Convergence in the Digital Age

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

International Telecommunications Society (ITS)

Suggested Citation: Fugazzola, Caterina (2011) : 160 characters for change: China's mobile urban-rural divide, 8th International Telecommunications Society (ITS) Asia-Pacific Regional Conference, Taiwan, 26 - 28 June, 2011: Convergence in the Digital Age

This Version is available at:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10419/52306>

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## 160 Characters for Change

### *China's Mobile Urban-Rural Divide*

At the end of May 2002, China officially became the biggest mobile market of the world, surpassing any other country in the world with its 170 million mobile phone users<sup>1</sup>. The steady expansion of this market is far from uniform, as the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) assumes a very different face in the urban, highly industrialized cities than in the less-developed countryside. Such difference has accelerated the process of social and economic polarization initiated in 1978 with Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy, which marked the beginning of Chinese marketization under the declared plan of "letting some people get rich first."<sup>2</sup> It was years later, during the 1990s and especially after the 1997 financial crisis, that the real change in the government's strategy began to be concretely felt on a citizen level;<sup>3</sup> the official introduction of the term "globalization" as a positive force for economic development "was accompanied by a rhetoric carefully constructed to justify it,"<sup>4</sup> a rhetoric that minimized the negative effects of globalization portraying it "as a process which can be brought under control by the state."<sup>5</sup>

The move towards a market-oriented economy in the pursuit of global competitiveness and modernization impacted the information sector perhaps more than any other, with informatization elevated "into the mother of all modernizations."<sup>6</sup> Following the newly-adopted market logic, the

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1 Tai, Z., & Sun, T. (2007). Media dependencies in a changing media environment: the case of the 2003 SARS epidemic in China. *New Media and Society*, 9, 994.

2 Deng Xiaoping's famous slogan during his southern tour.

3 Francis L.F. Lee, Zhou He, Chin-chuan Lee, Wan Ying and Mike Yao, "The Attitudes of Urban Chinese Towards Globalization: A Survey Study of Media Influence," *Pacific Affairs* 82, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 214.

4 Lee et al., 212.

5 Lee et al., 214.

6 Yuezhi Zhao, "Marketizing the "Information Revolution" in China," in *Media in the Age of Marketization*, ed. Graham Murdoch and Janet Wasko (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press Inc., 2007), 191.

informatization wave did not embrace the Chinese territory uniformly, but was targeted instead on the wealthy urban population – especially on the southern coast. Thus, when considering the case of mobile phones, speaking of China as the biggest market for the new technology without considering both a geographical and a class factor would be not only simplistic but plainly wrong. Recognizing that “the Chinese economy is largely bifurcated along the rural-urban divide,”<sup>7</sup> is the first step towards a more complete approach to the study of mobile technology in China.

With this, I have no intention of painting the Chinese mobile world as a black and white scenario of “haves” and “have-nots”, but I believe that establishing the limits of the canvas is an indispensable prerequisite in order to frame the rich gray area in-between – that area occupied by the class that Cartier, Castells and Qiu very aptly name “information have-less,” “a social, economic, and political category for millions of rural-to-urban migrants and laid-off workers.”<sup>8</sup>

Mobile technology played a vital role in China's telecommunication development, partially because of sheer luck with timing: China's telecommunication boom took place “precisely [at] the time cellular telephony was taking off worldwide,”<sup>9</sup> hence providing the government with the chance of rapidly bridging the gap with more developed countries. Mobile technology provided the solution to “the slow growth of fixed-line telephony [which] had been regarded as a major bottleneck for the expansion of the Chinese economy.”<sup>10</sup> Given these premises, the Chinese willingness to invest in the new sector comes as no surprise, and just as unsurprising is the choice of selecting the wealthier urban population as the most favorable target market. The first analog mobile phone was introduced in China in 1987,<sup>11</sup> and by the end of 2002 China had already surpassed every other country in the world in terms of number of subscribers, thus officially becoming the biggest mobile market on the planet.<sup>12</sup> In the urban areas, the speed of mobile penetration has been nothing short of staggering: while 2000 marked the

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7 Zhao, *Communication in China*, 76.

8 Cartier, Castells and Qiu, 9.

9 Lynch, 184.

10 Qiu, 52.

11 Michelle W.L. Fong, “Digital Divide Between Urban and Rural Regions in China,” *The Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries* 36, no. 6 (2009): 6.

12 Zixue Tai and Tao Sun, “Media Dependencies in a changing media environment: the case of the 2003 SARS epidemic in China,” *New Media & Society* 9, no. 6 (2007): 994.

time in which, “on average, every urban household owned a fixed-line telephone,”<sup>13</sup> just 7 years later cities like Beijing and Shanghai showed a mobile penetration of over 90 percent.<sup>14</sup> Although in 2005 the government implemented the “Village Connected Project”, which resulted in “about 97.1% of the villages in China [being] connected to at least one main line,”<sup>15</sup> however there is a striking imbalance, as “the ratio of mobile phone penetration rate between urban and rural areas has been about 7:1.”<sup>16</sup> The pattern of promoting urban development first is a common trait in developing and in capitalist countries, and is easily explained by “the imperatives of developing other industry in the cities, as well as the difficulties and high costs in extending lines to the countryside.”<sup>17</sup> Directing investment to the urban areas first does not mean, of course, that the government has no interest in promoting telecommunications in rural China: “to increase investment in the rural telecom industry as a means of laying the foundation for economic development has been a requirement that reflects Chinese government’s policy of the telecom industry. The rural market, with a huge potential subscriber population and low penetration rate, is considered to be a “blue ocean” for mobile communication.”<sup>18</sup>

Connecting rural areas is a necessary step towards overall economic development, and the central state is well aware of that. As part of a government sponsored nationwide project, in 2005 China Mobile invested CNY 9 billion to connect over 25,000 villages, improving the telephone penetration rate by 3.7 percent, and last year (July 2009) the company announced a massive plan with investments for a total of CNY 70 billion (\$ 10.5 billion) to enlarge both fixed and mobile networks in the rural area.<sup>19</sup> In January of the same year, China Unicom started a handset sales promotion program in rural areas, and in 2010 the company announced an investment plan to support the construction of communication infrastructure in Gansu province over the next five years.<sup>20</sup>

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13 Lynch, 182.

14 Sheng Dan and Jean-François Doulet, “Urban Informatics in China: Exploring the Emergence of the Chinese City 2.0,” in *Urban Informatics*, ed. Marcus Foth (2009), 5.

15 Leopoldina Fortunati, Anna Maria Manganelli, Pui-lam Law, and Shanhua Yang, “Beijing Calling... Mobile Communication in Contemporary China,” *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 21 (April 2008): 20.

16 Fong, 6.

17 Harwit, “China’s Telecommunications History,” 181.

18 Wu Shang, Huang Ping, and Chen Yuhong, “China Mobile: The Accelerating Elephant,” *Communication* 35 (October 2007): 19.

19 China Communication Network, <http://www.cn-c114.net/>

20 Ibid.

Despite this new wave of investments, the expanding gap between urban and rural regions is a well-documented reality that affects over half of the total population in China.<sup>21</sup> The next section will deal with a rapidly growing part of the rural population composed of families who live their lives in-between the two extremes of the digital divide, and who directly experience the increasing imbalance on a daily basis: migrant workers.

### *Blurring the Line – Migrant Workers*

To understand some of the dynamics of power that impact the growing population of migrant workers in China today it is necessary to go back half a century in the past, to the late 1950s, when the *hukou* (household registration) system was established by the government to “effectively differentiate the entire population along urban-rural lines.”<sup>22</sup> The idea behind the *hukou* system was to achieve stability in the state-controlled economy by preventing people from relocating, as “peasants were legally obligated to farm and remain in rural areas, while city dwellers were assigned to municipal work units.”<sup>23</sup> The establishment of the system is also largely connected to the failure of Mao's great leap forward, since it effectively functioned as a legal barrier to keep the rural population that had been plagued by years of famine from moving to the cities.<sup>24</sup> The separation was not only geographical, but also and especially social: the type of *hukou* possessed would give access to different citizen rights in the socialist economy, creating de facto two distinct classes with different access to employment, education, health care, etc.<sup>25</sup>

When the Maoist era came to an end and the new economic reforms were implemented, the *hukou* system underwent some drastic change to promote and allow rural-urban mobility, with the purpose of creating a steady inflow of labour essential to sustain the rapid industrialization of the cities.<sup>26</sup> The reforms allowed workers to move to the city in search of work, but little was done to bridge the social

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21 Cartier, Castells and Qiu (2005), Fong (2009), Harwit (2008), Zhao (2008) etc.

22 Wanning Sun, “Scaling Chinese Media: A Geographic Turn to Future Research,” *International Journal of Communication* 4 (2010): 540.

23 Cartier, Castells and Qiu, 12.

24 Zhao, *Communication in China*, 246.

25 Wanning Sun, *Maid in China: Media, morality, and the cultural politics of boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 6.

26 Sun, *Maid in China*, 7.

gaps and the different legal treatment associated to the non-resident status in registration system.

Obtaining a permanent resident permit is a long, costly and complicated bureaucratic process that just a small percentage of migrants, typically the wealthy ones, are able to do;<sup>27</sup> everyone else has to obtain a temporary permit and comply with crippling restrictions.<sup>28</sup>

Despite these paralyzing limitations, since the implementation of the economic reform the number of migrant workers has grown considerably, with rural workers “taking low-wage jobs that urban resident typically shun, including assembly work, construction, and domestic service.”<sup>29</sup> This unprecedented mass movement of people has had an incredible impact, increasing translocal links between rural and urban communities, with migrants creating new cross-societal networks through family ties and their personal experience<sup>30</sup>. What role did mobile technology play in the new hybrid landscape? What changes has it brought about on a social level? How are rural-urban dynamics affected by the widespread use of communication technologies, and how are such technologies changing old standards of labour?

The fact that mobile phone plays an increasingly important roles in the lives of migrant workers emerges clearly from statistics: even though the majority of the migrants are part of the lowest-income population, and a mobile handset can cost three to four times their monthly salary, the demand for mobile phones among them has rapidly increased in the years since their arrival on the Chinese market.

<sup>31</sup> In addition, the economic burden is only a small piece of the picture, as “the urban underclass usually overcomes more barriers, faces more threats, and tolerates more discriminatory policies in order to get connected, which demonstrates significant informational demand at the local level.”<sup>32</sup>

The impact of the new technology has been felt on a multi-level scale, and its perception and use is far from static – in fact, as this section will later explore, there has been a radical change in attitudes towards mobile phones between first and second generation migrants. On an obvious level, the

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27 Ibid.

28 Zhao, *Communication in China*, 246.

29 Cartier, Castells and Qiu, 12.

30 Sun, *Scaling Chinese Media*, 539.

31 Piu-lam Law and Yinni Peng, “Mobile Networks: Migrant Workers in Southern China,” in *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, ed. James E. Katz (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press), 55.

32 Cartier, Castells and Qiu, 22.

diffusion of mobile phones among migrants has been vital in keeping families connected across the urban-rural divide, as owning a personal device allows workers to overcome the many inconveniences of fixed phones, such as limited availability and long lines.<sup>33</sup> In addition, owning a mobile phone helps migrant workers to overcome the feeling of isolation and alienation by enabling them to create new, local networks around their workplace.

The widespread diffusion of mobile phones among migrant workers, as well as the technical evolution of the handsets themselves, has in the past years brought about a number of radical changes in the way the new technology is perceived and put into use. Once the first shock was absorbed and assimilated, and the practical usefulness of being able to be connected with one's place of origin had been explored, new dimensions began to materialize beyond the practical aspect of cellphones as functional communication tools. A whole world of symbolic meanings and implications emerged, at times only loosely connected to the actual functionalities of the devices. This includes, for example, the perception of cellphones as status-enhancing tools: despite the humiliating situation that makes workers “aware of the unbridgeable gap in quality of life that separates them from the wealthy who benefit from their labor,”<sup>34</sup> many consider their situation as an improvement from the rural reality they left behind, and one of the reasons lies in the chance it gave them at learning to use mobile phones.<sup>35</sup> The perception of cellphones as status symbols is particularly common among the younger generation, to the point that looks become sometimes more important than functionalities: many youths “use their savings to purchase trendy handsets but cannot afford voice call.”<sup>36</sup>

This status-symbol, consumerism-styled approach to mobile technology can be partially seen as a response to the frustration and rise in expectations caused by the increased connectivity between rural and urban areas, as “the out-and-return migration processes have also constituted the change of values and goals in migrants and potential migrants....the development of new communication technologies

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33 Law and Peng, 57.

34 Ke Yang, “A Preliminary Study on the Use of Mobile Phones amongst Migrant Workers in Beijing,” *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 21 (2008): 66.

35 Yang, 68.

36 Qiu, 69.

have made the villagers' homes in the less-developed regions more open to developments in the cities of the coastal region.”<sup>37</sup> In a somewhat paradoxical way, while economic growth and the shift towards a capitalist mode of production and consumption has contributed to the widening of the rural-urban gap, the increasing interconnectedness and diffusion of mobile phones in the rural areas have brought the realities of city life closer to villagers than ever before.

The growing informatization and exposure to city realities has created a young generation of migrant workers who “no longer view the city as a temporary home with the perspective of returning to the countryside after accumulating money to build a home or start a family. They are increasingly urbanized in their outlook and angered by the systemic discrimination and ill-treatment that is the lot of migrant workers.”<sup>38</sup> The combination of higher expectations for the future and a mindset increasingly influenced by market dynamics has given rise to two processes involving mobile phones: on one side, as urban reality and its consumerist dimensions become well-documented and ever more desirable to the younger generations in the villages, mobile technology is acquiring a new value, as rural youth seeks a new way of bridging the divide through consumption.<sup>39</sup> While saving money for their family back in the countryside was the imperative for the first generation of migrant workers, “many of today's young workers spend the bulk of their incomes on clothes and phones for themselves.”<sup>40</sup>

On the other side, in response to the young migrants' anger and frustrations, the mobile phone's perception and usage has also become an empowering tool on a grassroots level. Is it possible to see an evolution in the use of mobile phones among rural migrants geared towards mass-mobilization and protest? Existing studies reveal a rather pessimistic scenario in this sense, noting that “institutional constraints on the formation of networks beyond the scope of informal relationships and associations fundamentally disempower the have-less.”<sup>41</sup> Another partial explanation for the lack of grassroots

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37 Law and Peng, 56.

38 Vincent Kolo, “Honda strike a turning point for nascent workers' movement,” [www.socialistworld.net](http://www.socialistworld.net), website of the Committee for Workers' International, CWI, 12 June 2010.

39 Angel Lin and Avin Tong, “Mobile Cultures of Migrant Workers in Southern China: Informal Literacies in the Negotiation of (New) Social Relations of the New Working Women,” *Knowledge, Technology and Policy* 21 (2008): 74.

40 Jonathan Watts, “Workers in China grasp the power of the strike: A spectre of labour unrest is haunting the country – and it terrifies the ruling Communist party. A new force in the workshop of the world has become aware of its rights,” *The Observer (England)*, July 4, 2010.

41 Cartier, Castells and Qiu, 26.



movements addressing the rural-urban divide and the inequalities that thrive along its line comes with the geographical limitations of some of the most accessible – and most popular among migrant workers – wireless technologies, such as Little Smart (or *Xiaolingtong*), a handset device with limited service tied to the specific geographical area in which it is registered.

However, examples exist which prove the increasing importance of mobile phones in the change of employer-worker power dynamics and in the general challenges that new generations of worker are posing to old standards of labour.

In the past, lack of communication about openings in the job market made it extremely risky for migrant workers to abandon a job and go look for a new one somewhere else; consequently, workers were more likely to put up with almost any request from their employer for fear of losing their source of income. Communication technology has had a tremendous impact on job information access, and has, as a direct consequence, “strengthened the bargaining power of migrant workers with their factory proprietors.”<sup>42</sup> By sharing information about available jobs, salaries and benefits, workers can break free of the individual isolation and the submission they were forced into in the past, and they are able to claim the respect of their rights. In addition, lower-class workers are learning to use their mobiles to reclaim the possession and control of their time and their lives, either by relying on the entertainment component of cellphones (games, social networking) or, as in the case of a group of security guards working long night-shifts in Beijing, to set up networked “alarm systems” that would allow them to take some time off their job to sneak out to bars and clubs.<sup>43</sup>

The most striking (no pun intended) examples of the evolution of the perception and use of mobile phones in terms of empowerment and change of worker-employer dynamics, however, can be found in two important events that made it to the mainstream news around the world respectively in 2005 and 2010: the April-May 2005 strike in the Japanese-owned Uriden Electronics factory in Fuyong Town, Shenzhen, and the Summer 2010 strikes in various Honda factories in the country.

The significance of these events goes well beyond the single protests themselves: they represent the

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42 Law and Peng, 59.

43 Yang, 68.

first steps of an independent labor movement, organized and carried on by tech-savvy second-generation migrant workers via mobile phones.

*Sir, that's not what I ordered. Unexpected developments in mobile technology use*

Not directly connected to migrant workers, but nonetheless worth mentioning as the first example of Chinese citizen appropriating mobile technology to question the pre-existing order by creating an information channel parallel and alternative to the official ones, are the events that accompanied the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in 2003: in the midst of the health crisis residents in the Guangdong province found themselves face-to-face with a mainstream media system blatantly denying something that they were seeing happen before their very eyes.<sup>44</sup> Completely isolated by government-controlled media coverage, but more aware of the situation than anyone else, “the people of Guangdong province [...] passed this information around, in particular by mobile phone text messaging.”<sup>45</sup> In addition to SMS, bulletin board systems (BBS) also provided an alternative channel of updated information for the public.<sup>46</sup> In this first case of mobile phone and Internet being used to counterbalance failures in the official information system, once again it was the younger generation that played a pivotal role, voicing the complaints of that part of the population which is growing up “more cynical, individualistic and supportive of political protest, and less trustful of the regime and politics.”<sup>47</sup>

For the first time, in 2003 both the CCP and mobile users had a taste of the empowering implications of the new wireless technology – and of course, had a very different reaction to it. If the CCP responded to the realization by improving the SMS monitoring and “attempt[ing] to set more concrete boundaries to define public and private spheres,”<sup>48</sup> i.e. actively persecuting those users disseminating rumors outside of the private sphere, Chinese citizens were just as quick to learn from the experience. When two years later the explosion of a chemical plant near Harbin caused the

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44 Zixue Tai and Tao Sun, “Media dependencies in a changing media environment: the case of the 2003 SARS epidemic in China,” *New Media & Society* 9, no.6 (2007), 996.

45 Janey Gordon, “The Mobile Phone and the Public Sphere: Mobile Phone Usage in Three Critical Situations,” *Convergence* 13, no. 3 (2007), 310.

46 Ian Weber and Lu Jia, “SARS, youth and online civic participation in China,” in *Medi@sia: Global media/tion in and out of context*, ed. Todd Joseph Miles Holden and Timothy J. Scrase (London: Routledge, 2006), 84.

47 Weber and Lu, 88.

48 Lu and Weber, 933.

contamination of a river which was the major water source for the city, mobile users and netizens were ready, and a situation not dissimilar to the SARS case once again gave rise to numerous unofficial communication channels parallel to government ones.<sup>49</sup> If the reduced level of governmental persecution against citizens spreading rumors in the Harbin case can be explained with the relatively small scale of the protest<sup>50</sup> (as opposed to the SARS case, which immediately drew international attention), a different kind of explanation has to be sought to justify the CCP's behavior in response to a nation-scale wave of protests that shook China in May of the same year.

On April 5, 2005, Japan approved a series of new textbooks that in the view of China and Korea heavily downplayed the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers during WWII. This overlapped with an already tense period of discussions over the inclusion of Japan in the UN Security Council, enflaming Chinese nationalist sentiment and triggering a series of protests across the country.<sup>51</sup> Rallies and demonstrations were widely organized via mobile phones and Internet, but this time there was a surprising component to it. The government was aware of the protests well ahead of time,<sup>52</sup> but no action was taken to prevent them from happening; on the contrary, it seems that the central authorities actively cooperated with the protesters and helped them organize the rallies.<sup>53</sup> But why? A possible answer links the government's behavior to an international agenda, namely the Chinese goal to “undermine Japan's bid for the U.N. Security Council,”<sup>54</sup> and it is also possible – if somewhat unlikely – that the lack of governmental action to prevent the protests was simply a consequence of the state underestimating the scale of them.<sup>55</sup> A third explanation could be as simple as a “Why not?”, since after all, fostering the Chinese citizens' nationalistic sentiment against a foreign entity comes at virtually no risk for the central government, that can by so doing astutely direct the anger and frustration of the masses towards an enemy other than the government itself: this would support the theory of a

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49 Lu and Weber, 934.

50 Ibid.

51 John Chan, “Anti-Japanese protests erupt in China,” *World Socialist Web Site*, 8 April 2005.

52 Lu and Weber, 935.

53 Jessica C. Weiss, “The Anti-Japanese Protests in China and UNSC Reform” (Unpublished research, 2008), [http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jrv24/Weiss\\_08.pdf](http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jrv24/Weiss_08.pdf)

54 Weiss, 33.

55 Lu and Weber, 935.

communist regime that has become “ideologically dependent on Chinese nationalism as a means of diverting hostility and anger over the country's deepening social divide.”<sup>56</sup>

Whatever the reason behind it, however, the decision to allow the anti-Japanese protests proved counter-productive for the central government when the movement expanded to comprehend not only students and intellectuals but also workers in Japanese-owned factories. This evolution, which “evoke[d] the government's worst fears during the 1989 movement upsurge,”<sup>57</sup> saw for the first time Chinese workers mobilizing specifically to reclaim their right to form a trade union.<sup>58</sup>

The protest took the form of a strike in the Japanese-owned Uriden Electronics factory in Fuyong Town, Shenzhen, and was led by tech-savvy migrant workers in their early 20s, who took full advantage of the new mobile technology to stand up for their rights as workers. Arguably, the dissatisfaction fueling the strike had little to do with the students' anti-Japanese protest, and can instead be read as a perfectly fitting example of the impact of the generational change in the body of migrants working in the factories. As analysts of the Chinese labor scene noted as early as December 2004 – when a first round of protests was carried out as a reaction to the beating of several workers by the hands of a Japanese supervisor<sup>59</sup> – “strikes like this are becoming far more common as younger migrant workers exposed to the wealth of China's relatively rich eastern cities grow increasingly angry over what many see as their exploitation. Although few are unionized, communication and coordination among them is growing, often through the sending of coded messages to each other by cellphone.”<sup>60</sup>

As noted before, the only real connection between the 2005 and the students' anti-Japanese protests was in the timing, and the fact that the strike was directed against a Japanese-owned factory helped in making the workers' protest heard on the mainstream media. The Shenzhen strike was not an isolated case, however, but was instead just one among many examples of workers' demonstrations which had been shaking the Chinese territory for months. A notable case that needs to be addressed is that of a

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56 John Chan, “Anti-Japanese protests erupt in China,” *World Socialist Web Site*, <http://wsws.org>

57 “Striking Shenzhen Workers at Japanese-owned Wal-Mart Supplier Firm Demand Right to Unionize,” *China labour bulletin*, 23 April 2005.

58 “Massive Strike at Chinese Walmart Factory,” *No Sweat*, 4 May 2005.

59 “Striking Shenzhen Workers at Japanese-owned Wal-Mart Supplier Firm Demand Right to Unionize,” *China labour bulletin*, 23 April 2005.

60 Howard W. French, “Workers Demand Union at Wal-Mart Supplier in China,” *New York Times*, 16 December 2004.

protest in March 2004 in Lanzhou city, which supports the hypothesis previously presented of an increased rural-urban interconnectedness translating into an increasing awareness of the widening social gap brought about by the switch to a capitalist market system: during the protest, workers displayed a message “reject[ing] the government's claim that China would soon become a 'moderately well off' society;”<sup>61</sup> the message read: “You want to be 'moderately well-off', we just want to survive.”<sup>62</sup>

Individual examples of workers' mobilization, even when they show an evident anti-government component like in the case just reported, are not what the CCP is really worrying about. As long as the strikes are isolated, they do not constitute a serious threat to the central government; but what happens when wireless technology and new networks come into the picture? The possibility of individual movements appropriating communication technology to spread the mobilization across the country is what the CCP regards as the real danger – and rightly so, as the most recent round of protests demonstrates.

On May 17, 2010, a simple message started circulating among young workers in the Nahai Honda factory in Foshan city in southern China, and was rapidly propagated via SMS and QQ (the Chinese version of MSN): all the message said was “factory stroll.”<sup>63</sup> In a matter of just a few hours, the strike had evolved “into an essentially 'leaderless' movement, coordinated mainly via text messages sent on mobile phones.”<sup>64</sup> The protest stretched out for weeks and ended up with a victory for the workers, in what the South China Morning Post defined as “the first and most effective strike witnessed against a multinational in China.”<sup>65</sup>

The protesters' success went far beyond the simple pay rise they were asking for: Foshen set the example for other workers employed in Honda factories in Guangdong province, spreading the protest on a regional level. In June, young workers in Shenzhen armed themselves with their mobile phones and started their own protest demanding not only a better pay, but also the right to choose their own

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61 Simon Gilbert, “China's strike wave,” *International Socialism* 107, 29 June 2005

62 Ibid.

63 “China: Text messages, chat room play role in Honda strike,” BBC Monitoring World Media, 10 June 2010

64 Ibid.

65 Kolo

union representatives and the guarantee that there would be no punishment for striking.<sup>66</sup> This underlines an important shift from a fight against economic injustice to a pressing demand for political rights: workers “have begun to realize that their economic poverty is due to their political poverty.”<sup>67</sup> Also, the fact that the second round of protests was a direct consequence of the workers' success in Foshan underlines the pivotal role played by translocal flows of information circulating among workers through wireless networks: as one of the protesters declared, “this couldn't have happened if we didn't hear about how they were doing things in Foshan.”<sup>68</sup>

Both the 2005 and the 2010 rounds of strikes (and, one might add with a certain degree of confidence, the many under- or un-documented ones that happened in-between) are symbolic of the drastic change that the Chinese labor landscape is undergoing in this very years. The main agents of this change are young migrant workers, most of them teenagers or in their early twenties,<sup>69</sup> the new generation of “digital natives”<sup>70</sup> that has been growing up exposed to the two different but equally important sides of the “digital revolution”: on one side, China's informatization and economic development is widening the social divide by privileging the urban upper classes to the detriment of lower-income and rural workers; on the other side, the massive rural-urban migration has created a new class of migrants who have used the development of information technology and the spread of wireless communication tools to create new, empowering networks.

When these two forces are combined together in a new generation of young workers determined to fight for their rights, the possibilities for social change suddenly become a reality, and one that the central government can no longer ignore. The time has come for the Party to face every parent's worst nightmare: what they're dealing with is an army of teenagers at the peak of their rebellious phase. They're young, tech-savvy, and angry. And this time, a new cellphone for Christmas just won't do.

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66 Watts

67 Liu Kaiming, quoted in Jonathan Watts.

68 David Barboza and Keith Bradsher, “A Labor Movement Enabled by Technology,” 17 June 2010, *The New York Times*.

69 Kolo

70 Barboza and Bradsher

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## **Multimedia / Web Resources**

The Communication Initiative Network  
<http://www.comminit.com/>

Information and Communication Technologies for Development  
<http://www.ict4d.org.uk/>

MobileActive  
<http://www.mobileactive.org/>

ICTD 2009 Proceedings  
[http://www.scribd.com/doc/14234869/ICTD-2009-Proceedings#open\\_download](http://www.scribd.com/doc/14234869/ICTD-2009-Proceedings#open_download)