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To cite this article: Tzu-kai Liu (2015) Minority youth, mobile phones and language use: Wa migrant workers' engagements with networked sociality and mobile communication in urban China, *Asian Ethnicity*, 16:3, 334-352, DOI: [10.1080/14631369.2015.1015255](https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2015.1015255)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2015.1015255>



Published online: 24 Jun 2015.



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## Minority youth, mobile phones and language use: Wa migrant workers' engagements with networked sociality and mobile communication in urban China

Tzu-kai Liu<sup>a,b\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Anthropology, National Taiwan University, Taipei City, Taiwan;* <sup>b</sup>*Department of Southeast Asia, National Chi-Nan University, Nantou County, Taiwan*

This article explains the networked sociality of young Wa migrant workers made possible through the use of mobile phones and social media when these youths are on the move. Troubled by poor economic conditions in their rural homelands in southwest China, many Wa youth seek work in the urban manufacturing districts in southeast China. Most now rely on mobile phones to connect with the social media, QQ. Mobile networks promote a set of networked socialities which are integral to the continuity and development of Wa migrants' ethnic ties. Their networking practices show both the constraints they face and the potentiality they develop for voicing social inequality and reconfiguring the dominant Chinese language ideology in urban work environments. Their networked sociality is virtual and yet rooted in their real-world activities involving fragmented engagements with mobile devices and everyday language use. The sociality that emerges is partly a matter of free-will and partly structure-constrained.

**Keywords:** networked sociality; language ideology; mobile phone; social media; minority workers; China

This article explains the complexity of online social networking evidenced in the use of mobile phones and social media through the theoretical lenses of networked sociality and language ideology. The research is situated in the context of multilingual and multiethnic workplaces where the Chinese language and interpersonal social networks have become social and linguistic capital necessary for social mobility in class-differentiated urban China. Since the early 2000s, troubled by sparse economic opportunities in their rural homelands along southwest China's borders, innumerable migrant minority youths in their teens and twenties have been searching for jobs in the manufacturing districts of the coastal cities of southeast China. Yet, life as a menial factory worker in urban China is known to be tough by virtue of the social prejudice, class subordination, gender inequality and labor exploitation<sup>1</sup> experienced by ethnic minority youth who are economically driven to search for these low level positions.

This research focuses on a group of Wa migrant youths who migrate from their poor rural homes along China's southwest borders to the industrial districts of Shenzhen and Dongguang in Guangdong Province of southeast China. In China's ethnic history, ethnic Wa are politically categorized as a singular 'Wa Nationality' (wazu), one of 55 ethnic minorities. 'Wa Nationality' is officially established in the ethnological classification project of the 1960s. The majority of the ethnic Wa people inhabit the border regions

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\*Email: [llxpmk@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:llxpmk@nottingham.ac.uk)

between southwest China and northeast Myanmar. However, amidst the economic and political realities of transborder living, those classified as Wa do not fit easily into a single officially defined ethnic category because of their cultural differences and language variation. This research focuses on the out-migratory movement and mobile networks of young Wa workers whose homelands are located in the Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County (CWAC) of Yunnan, China, where approximately 85% of local residents are officially registered as ethnic Wa.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s, use of mobile telephones was expensive. Primarily wealthy people in China used these devices. Although PRC government's censorship on the Internet has been criticized for years as civic intervention by many Chinese citizens and foreign media, telecommunication technologies have become much more widely available in the past decade and, for minority migrant workers with no established kinship network to lean on far from home, reliance on mobile networks and digitally networked social media is pervasive. Interest in mobile networking and use of mobile phones among minority migrant workers is similar to that of other Chinese 'floating populations' (Han Chinese migrant workers) who migrate from the rural regions to the industrial cities desiring a more cosmopolitan lifestyle they have seen portrayed in the public media.<sup>3</sup> Acquiring a mobile phone is often the highest priority among minority migrant youth, who view it as both a personal communicative device and a desirable commodity for fulfilling their information needs, facilitating grassroots connections, coordinating political actions, and developing friendships when they are on the move.

Widespread commercial development of mobile communications and networks in China has opened up new ways of interacting and communicating within and across cultural and social spaces. Scholarly research has shifted attention within the study of 'information and communication technologies' (ICTs) from a focus on technological determination to interest in technological potentiality for establishing innovative, networked relationships and mobilizing inter-(intra)-ethnic and cultural identities.<sup>4</sup> Technological potentiality of ICTs has become a meaningful means for restructuring social movement and reshaping the dynamics between self and networked society.<sup>5</sup> Use of mobile phones, in particular, reveals technological potentiality in various ways. It can free the user from constraints of distance when on the move, offer a means to create networked sociality to display cyber connectivity with others, allow one to engage in multimodal digital communications that involve talking, texting, emailing, reading, stalking, and other practices, and provide a tool for users to adapt to the digital resources of new social media to express cultural, social, and political needs, individually or collectively.<sup>6</sup> Along these lines, this article aims to complement extant scholarly research on the study of mobile communication and Chinese labor migration by bringing the topics of ethnic politics and language use into discussions of mobile phones and social media in everyday life. It further explains how these Wa migrant youths perceive and engage with mobile networks to construct their views of networked sociality in the multilingual and multiethnic settings of labor migration.

According to the data collected by the CWAC government, in 2013, around 350 minority Wa workers labor in the manufacturing districts of Shenzhen and Dongguan.<sup>7</sup> These Wa workers (aged between 18 and 25) grew up in farmers' families. Troubled by sparse economic opportunities in their rural home communities, these Wa youth decided to migrate shortly after their graduation from local, junior-high boarding schools, although they had no previous travel or work experience in a big city. These Wa migrants are currently employed in the assembly-line production of electronics, cosmetics, sport shoes, toys, and furniture in the factories that produce goods labeled Made in China. The

ethnographic data of this research were collected from my interviews with 23 Wa migrants (11 males and 12 females) during my visits to their apartments and through the China-based social media in the summers of 2010 and 2011 and in May 2012. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in a conversational style with a protocol of interview questions. During this research, I also observed these Wa workers' online messaging and blogging with other Wa youth and their coworkers with a focus on their strategies of ethnic and social networking via mobile phones and the social media.

Theoretically, this research follows the scholarly discussions of networked sociality and emphasizes the significance of mobile networks and the influence of the dominant Chinese language ideology in the everyday lives of migrant Wa workers. As Wittel argues, 'in networked sociality the social bond at work is not bureaucratic but informational... Networked sociality is not characterized by a separation but by a combination of both work and play'.<sup>8</sup> He further suggests that technology-promoted networked sociality emerges alongside community-based sociality. The intersection of online-networked sociality and offline sociality is central to my ethnographic study of the strategies and patterns of Wa migrant youth's mobile networks.

Moreover, extant literature on the study of digital social networking suggests a concept of 'networked publics'. Networked publics are virtual communities characterized by a shared inclusiveness among an aggregation of individuals who connect and reconnect to each other through the Internet, mobile phones, tablets or phablets. Focusing on the concept of networked publics, some research follows Habermas' thinking about a public sphere with democratic aims<sup>9</sup> and emphasizes the impacts of online social networking on social movement.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in her study of Trinidadians' ways of using Facebook in the Caribbean, boyd suggests that digital networking technologies play a significant role in sustaining and complicating local publics through facilitating daily practices of networking that enhance appreciation for locally defined sociality and cultural values. This type of networked public, viewed locally as a social web rather than a social movement is central to the dynamics of language use and mobile networking that I observed among migrant Wa workers.

However, the notion of networked sociality differs from the notion of networked publics in terms of its scope and purpose in online networking. Networked publics emphasize public online participation in contrast with private online networking. Networked publics are open to the general publics but the authors who are often invisible and, sometimes, are given pseudonyms. Networked sociality, instead, emphasizes the cultural logics of networking and relationships that build on horizontal ties and the free circulation of digital information. With this in mind, this article uses a notion of networked sociality, referring to the practices of creating interpersonal ties built on mobile communication.

Furthermore, some recent research has explained Chinese migrant workers' engagements with mobile communication in relation to gender and class relations. For instance, Qiu proposes the term 'working-class network society' to underscore Chinese migrant workers' use of digital communication technologies in various contexts, e.g., in Internet cafés and through prepaid mobile phones. He opposes the notion of class as a fixed social category and suggests that Chinese migrant workers are both the people who 'have-less' in the technosocial life and the active agents in their own negotiations over class relation and social hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in her study of young migrant women and their social mobility in the city of Beijing, Wallis argues that these women's use of mobile phones reveals a condition of immobile mobility.<sup>12</sup> Despite being stuck in immobile labor conditions, mobile phones empower these migrant women to develop their own social

mobility. Although both Qiu and Wallis see class and gender as constructed social categories rather than taken-for-granted ideas, I argue that they ignore language differences and ethnic politics, which are also key factors in Chinese migrant workers' emergent technosocial lives.

With respect to online language use, extant literature has paid little attention to language ideology and its impacts on networked sociality or to language variations among non-native Chinese migrant workers, e.g., Wa migrant workers. Unlike Qiu's and Wallis' studies, my research suggests that while mobile phones and the Internet seem to presuppose cyberconnectivity and mobility, at the same time, they reinforce a strict effect of 'enregisterment' (standard usage of a dominant language, a term proposed by Agha).<sup>13</sup> In the case I examine the dominant Chinese language ideology is embedded within Chinese information communication technologies. I argue that minority Wa workers' networked sociality is subject to evaluation within linguistic and ideological hierarchies imposed by the majority society. Their own practices using a regional dialect of Chinese and reflecting poor Mandarin literacy are devalued. In their networking practices, the Wa often struggle to reconfigure the Chinese language ideology that functions as the dominant 'register' (standardized written and spoken accounts of language use) in cybercommunication. They find it difficult to express bitterness and mixed feelings regarding harsh work conditions in the dominant linguistic mode. Mobile networks and the social media, I further suggest, have become a discursive field for Wa youth for voicing their views of the dominant Chinese language and, potentially, for mobilizing and transforming social and linguistic hierarchies through their mobile texting and blogging.

### **Wa youth and labor migration**

For all migrant workers, life as a menial factory worker in urban China entails experiences of class subordination and labor exploitation. But, it is especially tough for ethnic minority migrant workers who face those obstacles along with discrimination based on their ethnic background, languages, and lower levels of literacy in standard Chinese. Compared to Han Chinese migrants, ethnic minority migrants are typically not as well educated and occupy the lowest rung of the working class ladder when it comes to job hiring. The combination of poor schooling and social inequality creates an obstacle for Wa migrant youth who must compete with their Han counterparts to achieve job promotion in the Chinese-dominant labor market. To be successful, there is enormous pressure to assimilate to mainstream Han Chinese culture, to master Chinese speaking and writing, and to be connected with coworkers via mobile communication technologies.

Starting in March 2005, due to a shortage of cheap labor at urban factories in southeast China, a group of Han Chinese agents assisted two Shenzhen-based toy plants to recruit cheap employees from among the Wa. They came first to the border town of Cangyuan which was the seat of the CWAC. Even though massive rural-to-urban labor migration happened much earlier throughout China's rural areas in the 1990s and the early 2000s, the factory labor recruitment for Wa youth in 2005 was the first massive labor migration in the CWAC. In the following years, urban opportunities attracted thousands of Wa youth (who were in their mid-teens) to leave their homeland to work in cities such as Shenzhen and Dongguang. My research follows this trend of Wa labor migration between 2010 and 2012.

Discrimination based on educational deficiencies, non-standard linguistic skills, minority ethnicity, and gender is a commonplace experience for these young minority migrants, who are often stigmatized by their employers and Chinese urbanites as being

more backward and less qualified than Han Chinese migrant workers. Born in the 1990s, the migrant Wa youth further experienced China's rapid development of telecommunication technologies and mobile services in the last decade. They are well aware of a deepening social inequality between the cities in which they have relocated and their rural, mountainous ethnic homelands.

Wa migrant youth's experience of long-term labor migration is quite distinct from the seasonal labor migration pattern of middle-aged Wa villagers and the migrants' age mates who married early and stayed home to work on their families' agricultural fields. These two groups leave home only when they can be spared from agricultural demands. In late fall and winter, many of them normally look for work in the gold mining areas of northeastern Myanmar, just over the border from the Wa Autonomous County. Moreover, unlike migrant Wa youth's active engagements with digitally networked social media in the settings of rural-to-urban migration, rural Wa villagers who have stayed close to home normally use mobile phones only for voice-based communication and mobile texting due to a lack of affordable mobile 3G or 4G services in the Wa areas of the CWAC in the past few years.

Furthermore, scholarly research on the experiences of Chinese migrant women has shown that gender plays a determining role in (re)shaping selfhood and self-development.<sup>14</sup>

With respect to marriage and work plans, gender accounts for a different trajectory of labor migration for Wa migrant females compared to males. According to my interviews with 23 Wa migrant youths, all of them made a similar comment on the master discourse of gender difference. They said that migrant Wa women are typically seen by their factory managers as more docile and willing to conform to long hours and heavy workloads than their male counterparts. Minority Wa men are, by contrast, stigmatized by their managers as less diligent and 'uncivilized'.

The story of two Wa youths – Jane and Nam – exemplifies the out-migratory experiences of Wa workers in China. In their late teens, they were unable to continue their high school educations because of financial hardships faced by their families. Nam was the eldest son in his family. He sacrificed his own educational opportunity to support his family and make it possible for his three younger siblings to attend school. Jane was the youngest in her family. She explained, 'I got a sufficient score on my high school entrance exam, but my parents could not afford to have me continue my education because of a shortage of money. I cried about that for almost one week'. Though they attended the same junior-high boarding school in their home township, they were in different grades and did not actually meet one another. They became connected through their mobile phones and the social media site, QQ, when they worked in the city. After knowing one another online for three years in Shenzhen, Jane and Nam decided to get engaged in 2008.

In 2005 when Nam earned his first-month's wage, he went directly to a second-hand mobile phone shop to buy his first mobile phone. In his second month of migrant life in the city, Nam spent almost all his off-work hours connecting with his friends via QQ, watching online TV programs, or playing online games. Like other female workers, Jane was less interested in online gaming. She, instead, was more interested in setting up her personal QQ page decorated with shinning colors and sharing the group photos she took with her female coworkers and Wa friends. Nam's and Jane's independent participations in mobile networking and sociality are 'fragmented' in that they are often prohibited from picking up any phone calls to connect to QQ during their work hours. Moreover, Nam and Jane, like two-thirds of the 23 Wa migrants with whom I conversed, are sometimes forced to disconnect from QQ networking when they lack money to refill their prepaid mobile

phone credits. They have to wait for their monthly pay dates to refill their phone credits to reconnect to the social media.

### Mobile phones, social media and language use

Over the past decade, the development of ICTs in China has produced a mobile industry with text-messaging services as well as a market for second-hand or knock-off (*shanzhai*) cell phones and other digital products.<sup>15</sup> While state censorship and control of information are common on Internet platforms such as Sina Microblog (ch. *sina weibo*) and Baidu, these practices have been seriously criticized by the public and Western authorities as political intervention that undermines global citizenship and human rights.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, China has developed its own domestic ICT market and claims the largest population of mobile phone and Internet users in the world. Online messaging and texting through mobile phones are difficult for the Chinese government to restrain. Mobile phone users in China can deliberately type and instantly forward posts to their friends well before state censorship orders are implemented. It is in this medium of technological potential that Chinese minority workers living and working in the urban manufacturing districts employ their mobile phones to connect to social media to spread news of labor conditions and to protest.<sup>17</sup> Some workers develop strategies to evade managerial surveillance and regulation when they work on an assembly line.<sup>18</sup> The application of mobile communication to China's labor protest can also be seen in media reports, as evidenced in one of the labor protests in Guangdong in 2010 (*New York Times*, 16 June 2010).

Compared to ethnic minority writers, artists, or musicians, who live in cosmopolitan areas or work at ethnic theme parks (re)producing commodified minority cultures in song, dance, art, or literature, most minority migrant workers in urban China instead rely on prepaid mobile telephones to connect to Tencent, a Chinese-language online texting and blogging platform, for opportunities to network with ethnic fellows, coworkers, or strangers. Initiated in 1999, QQ is the commercial name of Tencent company's instant 'short message service' (SMS). Started in 2007, Tencent has opened its social media capabilities of Mobile QQ which are now widely used by the working-class population in urban China.<sup>19</sup> The service allows Chinese migrant workers (including Wa youth) to use their prepaid mobile phones to connect to QQ wirelessly during their daily work breaks or in recreational time or when they are on the move between the cities and their rural homelands. QQ Space – another online social networking site (SNS) provided by Tencent – is roughly equivalent to the site MySpace, a highly popular networking site before Facebook overtook it in the United States. QQ Space has become the most popular SNS among minority Wa workers since 2009. Unlike China's middle-class and domestic college students' preference for using Chinese social media such as 'Renren.com' and 'Pengyou.com', minority Wa workers prefer to use their mobile phones to connect to Mobile QQ or QQ Space to develop blogs based on personal preferences for nicknaming their virtual sites, reviewing or commenting on other posts and photos, and, for some, turning texted messages into instant conversations.

QQ Space and Mobile QQ limit each post to 140 Chinese characters. Wa migrant youth can repost their messages, divide their messages into different message lines, or turn their messages into communicative messaging. Although all 23 Wa migrant workers I interviewed are bilingual speakers in both the native language of Wa and a local dialect of Chinese, they write their online texts in Chinese rather than in Wa.

Historically, Wa is a spoken language lacking its own writing system. Even though the PRC central government selected one variety of Wa to create a standard Wa orthography

in 1965 (followed by subsequent revision in the mid-1980s), this writing system is currently used only in the context of state-sponsored media reports and publications in support of the state's civilizing plan through the invention of written language for ethnic minorities who have no written languages. Due to lack of government funds and ignorance of the varieties of Wa, all public schools in the ethnic Wa regions of southwest China discontinued their Wa/Chinese bilingual curriculum and the teachings of standard Wa orthography in 2004. Thus, none of the Wa migrant youth with whom I conversed between 2010 and 2012 have fully mastered Romanized Wa orthography or use it in mobile communications.

In the densely populated manufacturing districts of Shenzhen and Dongguan, Chinese and non-Chinese minority migrant workers are diverse in their linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Standard Chinese and the regional dialect of Cantonese are the dominant languages. Non-standard varieties of Chinese and minority languages are ranked lower than standard Chinese and Cantonese. Languages used in mobile communication also form region-based language hierarchies reflected in multilingual settings of cyber-communications.

Since all mobile texting relies on facility with standard Chinese composition, for those users without sufficient competency in the dominant Chinese language, there are enormous language barriers. Not only do Wa migrant youth lack a writing system suitable for expression in their *native* language on the mobile platform, they are generally not highly literate in their *second* language, which is a regional variety of Chinese. They are neither digital natives nor are they prepared to deal with the complexity of Chinese literacy, which requires knowledge of thousands of symbols/characters. The one writing system Wa migrant youth *do* know is the Roman-alphabet-based 'pinyin' system taught in schools across China to increase literacy rates, especially in rural areas of the country. In China, Chinese speakers can be grouped linguistically into seven dialect families, each of which consists of several regional dialects. Though their speech is often not mutually intelligible, speakers of different varieties of Chinese use the same writing system incorporating a shared set of standard Chinese characters. Chinese pinyin is employed to represent the speech sounds of Chinese as either single characters or in combinations of several characters. All messaging input on digital media begins with the pinyin system, which is then automatically converted to symbols/characters via an input method editor (IME).<sup>20</sup> In order to produce any digital message, Wa migrants have to first input the pinyin letters on their keyboards and then choose among actual Chinese characters that pop up in the display screen as text candidates predicted by the IME.

Next is an example of a male Wa migrant's texting on Mobile QQ.

Gab, a male Wa migrant in his late teens, had been working at a factory in Shenzhen for three months since he dropped out of the local junior high school in his Wa hometown in 2011. When the factory gave him his first-month's wage (around CN\$1100 [US\$183]), he went directly to an electronic shopping mall in downtown Shenzhen to buy his first smartphone, which cost CN\$1000. He knew all his Wa coworkers and other migrant workers were using QQ, and desired to connect with them by setting up his own QQ profile. On his QQ profile, he added a Chinese sentence to express his thoughts about being a Wa worker (see Table 1).

The boldface font in Line 1 of Table 1 shows the exact written Chinese words. These signs are used in a nonstandard manner. Relying on 'Roman-alphabet encoded technology' on his mobile phone, this migrant Wa youth selected from among different characters whose Chinese pronunciations resemble the same syllable sound, e.g., 'cuo'. While the substitution of a Chinese word with a similar sound can sometimes become language play



Table 1. A sentence shown on a Wa worker's QQ profile.

Line 1		是你譜過車，还媞我下挫站
Line 2	Chinese Pinyin transcription	Shi ni cuo guo che, hai shi wo xia cuo zhan
Line 3	Gloss	is you miss pass car or is I get out wrong station
Line 4	Standard writing	是你错过车，还是我下错站
Line 5	Meaning	Did you miss your car? Or did I get out at the wrong station?

among other Internet or mobile phone users in China, this Wa worker's misspellings differ from intended language play online. Instead, workers' misspellings often become an index marking them not only as beginning Internet users but also as recently arrived migrant workers. Their nonstandard language practices frequently appear on the QQ profiles of my interviewees and other migrant Wa workers.

In an interview with me using the QQ instant text messaging in 2012, Gab further explained his way of online social networking as well as his views of the standardized language ideology of Chinese and the Chinese notion of 'wenhua' (literally 'culture'; referring to 'educational level' in China). He said, 'I just moved from the Wa homeland to Shenzhen. How can I stand this [migrant] life? If someone does not have wenhua, that person is useless'. I asked, 'What does wenhua mean to you working in city?' After a long pause, he replied to me, saying

I experienced it. Urban residents looked down on me since I did not know how to write my Chinese names properly even though I received education at an elementary school in the past. Without competence in writing standard Chinese, I am like someone who has not received any Chinese education. There are a lot of places in which I need to know how to write standard Chinese [referring primarily to online networking]. I feel bad about my lack of competence in written Chinese. Living in the city as a minority worker is different than my experience living in Wa communities where I can speak my native language and do not need to use Chinese writing in communication. I am not good at Chinese writing. I often type the wrong words. I have a hard time learning how to use a computer and technology as well. This requires knowledge of how to type Chinese words. My typing speed is too slow. My parents do not know the work situation and the dominant Chinese language used in cities. They also have no idea about the impact of wenhua on my younger brother's life if he does not have wenhua. That's why I hope my brother can continue his school education to gain wenhua.

This interview excerpt shows this Wa migrant youth's evaluation of his proficiency in written Chinese, which he recognizes is not only an identifiable register asymmetrically distributed in a highly class-stratified and cosmopolitan everyday life, but also a communicative prerequisite in online networking. Even though he is only a beginner with respect to the Internet and mobile phone use in the city, he speaks a local dialect of Chinese fluently, one commonly used in his homeland area. Yet, in the views of urban residents his use of the local dialect is marked and ranked lower in the sociolinguistic hierarchy than standard Mandarin Chinese. His words further reveal a critical view of the dominant Chinese ideology embedded in online social networking, which relies on instantaneous, written conversation rather than fluent speech. Explicit in his remarks is his sense of what is required for having 'wenhua' in cyberconnectivity; his evaluation of his written skills as inadequate gives rise to feelings of lack and regret. This sense of being devalued from the perspective of the dominant Chinese ideology in online social networking is unique to Wa migrants. It is internalized and imagined by these migrants as integral to their self-identities.

### Networked sociality, language ideology and QQ

Without full competence in standard spoken Chinese, all my Wa interviewees most often use a regional variety of Chinese to converse with local Chinese residents and other Chinese migrant workers in cities. Migrant Wa youth in Shenzhen speak to each other in Wa in their face-to-face communications. As a result the dominant Chinese language ideology, that devalues nonstandard regional dialects as well as ethnic speech, is a constant ethos that characterizes Wa migrant workers' experiences of labor migration and mobile communications.

In their study of Chinese domestic workers in Beijing, Dong and Blommaert argue that the monoglot language ideology of standard Mandarin Chinese (*putong hua*) is central to Chinese migrant workers' identity construction when they communicate with urban residents and Han Chinese workers whose language use differs from theirs.<sup>21</sup> These scholars further explain that in the multilingual environment of cosmopolitan China, migrant workers' native varieties and accented Chinese can become an index of their regional origins, reproducing hierarchically defined 'scale' and 'space' including standard/non-standard, urban/rural, and center/periphery. They also argue that such a scaling process reveals Chinese to be a polyglot repertoire within one language, which is dominated by a monoglot ideology. This ideological rationalization and scaling, I suggest, are central to Wa migrant workers' conceptions of language hierarchy and the standard Chinese language ideology.

To understand the influences of the dominant language ideology of standard Chinese on minority workers' virtual and social life, next I examine some selected text messages from Mobile QQ and blogs of 23 minority migrant workers. In particular, I focus on ethnic Wa expressions of self-identity as migrant workers and members of an ethnic minority. I also focus on how bilingual Wa-Chinese speakers with limited writing competence in standard Chinese make strategic improvisations and moral negotiations with the dominant Chinese language ideology in their mobile communications. My concern is also with how they make use of externally adopted knowledge and language practices to express their mixed sense of ethnicity and class subordination and, simultaneously, reconfigure the hierarchical scale of the dominant Chinese language ideology in their mobile communications.

Wa migrant workers' patterns and strategies of online language use are closely related to their views of QQ networked sociality, which presents four features of cyber connectivity. These are aggregated friendships, self-introduction, mobile 'laoxiang' networks and domesticity (referring to co-ethnic networks), and phonetic change in mobile texting and messaging.

First, Wa migrants' networked sociality is an aggregation of a mass of individuals, which is an extension of preexisting offline friendships (Wa, non-Wa, ethnic minorities, and Han Chinese). When Wa youths want to find other migrants who are from the same minority regions of southwest China, they can search using keystrokes for their names in Wa or Chinese through viewing their friends' QQ friend lists. This is not only a public display of 'befriended network'<sup>22</sup> but also a node of extended ethnic ties. For migrant Wa youth, online ethnic ties are related to offline ethnic networks formed in the relocated urban work settings. But the online ethnic ties have a few unique characteristics that differ from offline ethnic ties developed in rural Wa communities. In their rural homelands, Wa people's religious participation and gift exchanges are typically the most important way for constructing reciprocal networked sociality based on cultural norms, religious roots, and kin ties. In the urban workplaces, Wa migrant youth rarely have a chance to organize

ethnic Wa festival and religious activities and develop strong kin groups. Instead, they use mobile phones as a platform to develop online ethnic ties based on the shared identities ‘worker’ and ‘homeland’.

The second feature of networked sociality is online self-introduction which is centered on networked individualism rather than community-based sociality. Unique to migrant Wa workers’ self-introduction on QQ cyberspace is their expression of the mixed feelings about desire for labor employment outside the community and the hardships of working in the cities. In my interviews, all of Wa migrants criticized the harsh workplace discipline and social prejudice, such as unequal job promotion opportunities, that they faced in the workplaces. At the same time, they viewed labor migration as a desirable adventure, affording them a chance to travel outside their native communities, see the urban world, and potentially fulfill their dreams of upward social mobility. These desire conflicted with their actual experiences of harsh low-wage working conditions. As Florence explains, ‘constant striving and perseverance are defining features of labor work (*dagong*) and of migrant workers’ subjectivities’.<sup>23</sup>

This feature of self-introduction surrounding labor exploitation and the naturalization of individual aspiration in China’s labor market can be explicitly evidenced in the messages of Wa migrant youth on Mobile QQ and QQ Space. For instance, when they set up nicknames for their QQ profiles, they normally give a brief description of themselves. Most of them use local Chinese phrases in Yunnanese Chinese, which is a variety of Chinese commonly used in their Wa homeland areas, to describe who they are and their idiosyncratic views of techno-social life.

In Table 2, Line 2.1 shows the perplexed status of a migrant Wa youth who introduces himself using QQ cyberspace by expressing the constraints he has experienced in migration and labor. Line 2.2 illustrates the rootlessness of migrant life and uses a second-person pronoun, ‘ni’, to point to a deterministic fate under the control of others. These excerpts of self-introduction reveal specific wordings Wa workers’ use to express their struggles in becoming minority migrants. This expression further works as a meaningful index pointing to Wa migrant youth’s double subjectivities in both their lived time and digitalized life.

On QQ Space and Mobile QQ, however, this self-introduction does not always index the real life and the perplexed status of migrant workers that are evidenced when Wa youths engage in mobile texting and online messaging and participate in chat groups with strangers. Following the public ideology of self-concealment in cyber-networking, a Wa user’s real status can be concealed behind the invisible, virtual community on QQ and other digital devices. Some Wa migrants use the names of big Chinese cities as their homelands, or use cartoon figures and photos of movie stars as personal portraits in their QQ profiles. Gauging from the personal profiles listed on Wa youth’s QQs, it is sometimes difficult to link their real cultural and ethnic backgrounds with the virtual reality

Table 2. Self-introduction on QQ.

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2.1 *jiaru shiguang daoliu, wo neng zuo shengme* (假如时光倒流, 我能做什么, 还不是一样的听天由命)

What would I do if I could turn time back? There is nothing I can do but resign myself to my fate.

2.2 *feng jue ding le pugongyin di fang xiang, ni jue ding le wo de youshang* (风决定了蒲公英地地方, 你决定了我的忧伤)

The wind decides where the dandelion goes. But you decide my sadness.

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they create. However, as told by Wa youths in my interviews, phrases of self-introduction that they use to introduce themselves on their QQ profiles do create meaningful statements, especially for those who know each other, such as Wa, Han Chinese, and non-Wa ethnic minority coworkers at current and former workplaces.

The third feature of QQ networked sociality is the ‘laoxiang’ network of Wa migrants. In their everyday conversations with their coworkers, Wa migrant workers often use the standardized Chinese word, ‘laoxiang’ (literally ‘co-ethnics’ or ‘fellow villagers’ who come from same homeland regions or provinces), to form unique interpersonal networked sociality and differentiate themselves from other working-class populations of the inland regions of China. In their digital life, many Wa workers would also set up or join QQ chat groups and friend groups based on the shared recognition of homeland between themselves and QQ friends.

Laoxiang networking, in particular, is an area-based interpersonal ethnic tie shared by Wa migrant workers, who come from a same region (i.e., southwest China) or share similar Wa cultural practices (i.e., Wa ethnicity). These minority migrants can converse with each other using either a specific dialect of Wa or Yunnanese Chinese – a variety of Chinese used in Yunnan. These Wa workers often see the mobile laoxiang network not only as a shared interpersonal identity, but also a support group for getting job information and encouragement in the cities.

Two types of laoxiang networks have been circulating in these Wa workers’ mobile QQ and QQ Space. Both of them are based on connections other than preexisting kinship social relations. One is the interethnic ‘laoxiang’ network, which is based on shared provincial identities among migrant workers (including Wa and Han Chinese). For example, on Mobile QQ chatgroups, workers from a same province form a same chatgroup such as ‘Laoxiang Network of Yunnanese Workers’ (*yunnan dagong laoxiang*, literally workers from the Province of Yunnan) and ‘Laoxiang Network of Guizhou Workers’ (*guizhou dagong laoxiang*). Among diverse mobile laoxiang networks (e.g., *yunan-gui-chuan*; *guizhou*; *henan*), the Yunnan laoxiang network plays a significant role for finding job information, establishing connections, and conveying affinities among Wa, non-Wa ethnic minorities, and Han Chinese workers from Yunnan Province in southwest China. In Shenzhen and Dongguan, the Wa migrant workers often commented to me that Yunnanese migrant workers, who recognized and connected with each other through a similar interethnic laoxiang network and spoke a mutually communicable Chinese dialect, were relatively more trustworthy than other migrant workers and city residents in Shenzhen and Dongguan. Thus, living in the displaced urban multiethnic areas, Wa workers recognize that Chinese cosmopolitan areas and urban residents have had higher economic incomes and class status than they themselves. But the migrant workers also recognize that urban workplaces are full of risk and acts of deception which are against Wa culturally defined ritualistic reciprocity and interpersonal generous trust. The laoxiang networks offer one strategy for living with trusted others in a largely unfamiliar milieu.

Ironically, in both the workplace and the labor market, the provincial laoxiang network often becomes a derogatory category under the views of urban employers. A Wa youth explains

in Shenzhen, many factories do not want to hire people from Yunnan Province because Yunnanese workers might form a strong laoxiang network to fight for their labor rights. In their views [the views of employers], Yunnanese workers also tend to be involved in interethnic conflicts and physical fights with other non-Yunnanese workers at the same factories.

The other laoxiang network is intra-ethnic, based on shared ethnic Wa identities. Members of this network are Wa workers who are from two different Wa Autonomous

Counties of southwest China. They speak two distinctive dialects of Wa: Puraog Wa and Va. On QQ, the Wa mobile laoxiang network is evidenced in the chat group (e.g., 'Wa Tribe', *wazu buluo*) which is a significant cyberspace for mobile ethnic connectivity, especially sending Chinese messages in their own regional variety and disseminating information and photos about local ethnic festivals and cultures in their home villages in order to sustain their cultures in the context of rural-to-urban migration.

Meanwhile, as shared by Wa migrant youths in Shenzhen and Dongguang, their dark skins are a most visible sign of difference, distinguishing the Wa from the other 55 officially categorized Chinese ethnic minorities. Their dark coloring draws other migrant workers' curiosity in the work settings at the factory and in urban contexts where they live. Frequently, Han Chinese workers make comments on the dark skin of Wa youth producing racialized discourses that then circulate in urban marketplaces. A counter-discourse, commonly seen on Wa migrant youth's intra-ethnic laoxiang network on QQ, addresses the public misunderstanding and social prejudice of Wa bodily blackness.

In Figure 1, a male Wa youth (A) expressed his heightened awareness of being Wa and black. He indicates that 'Wa sisters are black pearls and Wa brothers are black princes. We feel proud of having black skins because wealthy people cannot buy blackness... please



Figure 1. QQ message photo about Wa blackness.

share this message if you – Wa migrants – have the same feelings’. Along this line, another migrant Wa worker (B) makes a comment, saying ‘brothers, what you said is great. This is similar to my thought. Black is healthy. Proud of being black. Ha! Ha! Ha!’

The fourth feature of QQ networked sociality is Wa youth’s agentive action of phonetic change in QQ messaging and mobile texting. This feature is closely related to these migrants’ reactions to the domination of Chinese language ideology.

Recent studies on mobile texting have argued that the technical exigencies of linguistic repertoires and styles are innovative in keeping messages short, reducing numbers of keystrokes, using emoticons, and omitting nonessential letters to create playfulness or instant temporality of conversational turn-taking.<sup>24</sup> However, in standard Chinese-dominated mobile texting and blogging, linguistic abbreviations, acronyms for phrases, and reduction of letters are seldom observed. Instead, emoticons, non-standard spelling and punctuation are often used on QQ.<sup>25</sup> Aside from the use of emoticons, Wa migrant workers in Shenzhen and Dongguang often intentionally make phonetic changes in a few non-standard Chinese words in their texting messages.

The excerpt of a female Wa migrant youth’s QQ message is an example (see Table 3). She substitutes the standardized Chinese verb ‘qu’ with ‘ke’ and a standardized noun ‘li’ with ‘die’, following the linguistic rule of a regional variety. This practice is similar to other Wa migrant experiences of online language use.

[Local Dialect of Chinese] [Standard Chinese]  
 Verb: 客 (ke) → 去 (qu)  
 Noun: 跌 (die) → 里 (li)

Recognizing the character candidates and knowing which one to choose in a particular context is the domain of Chinese users who are literate in standard Chinese. For Wa youth who want to engage in digital messaging, the steep learning curve is often overcome by an intense desire for connection rather than standard language perfection. This desire is evident in their conversations on social networking sites where they risk public humiliation for being too slow to type text in chat interfaces. Wa migrant youth often create unique linguistic expressions or codes to express their ethnic identities by typing the sounds of regional Chinese dialects into standard Chinese words. In this way, non-standard, pidgin-like or phonetic changes in mobile texting and QQ messaging can resemble locally defined ethnic expressions, such as those used in rural Wa homelands. Although viewed negatively according to the dominant Chinese language ideology in urban China, such phonetic changes constitute acts of strategic improvisation and offer meaningful resources for Wa migrant workers to express their regional identities based on their unique ‘accented’ dialect of Chinese. By connecting to others who know Yunnanese Chinese or the Wa language well, they create a unique discursive cyber zone to distinguish themselves from other migrant workers who speak different dialects of Chinese and other minority languages. Such actions as part of QQ networking can also redefine social and linguistic differences between urban workplace and rural homelands.

Table 4 shows another example of phonetic change. It is an example of mobile messaging among three Wa migrant workers (1, 2, and 3) and one Han Chinese worker (4). These four migrant workers frequently contact each other through an interethnic mobile laoxiang network on QQ. These three Wa workers have also been connecting to each other by using another intraethnic Wa laoxiang network through their mobile phones. This mobile QQ messaging appeared in lengthy online discussions about a newly uploaded Wa hip-hop song on a blog about Wa hip-hop culture. With the support of

Table 3. Stylized accented written Chinese on QQ.

	只	要	会	讲	普	通	话	客	到	哪	跌	都	不	怕	
1	Chinese Pinyin transcription	zhi	yao	hui	jiang	pu	tong	hua	ke	dao	na	dou	bu	pa	
2	Gloss	if	want	can	speak	Standard Mandarin			go	to	which	die	not	afraid	
3	Meaning	If people can speak standard Mandarin, they need not be afraid of where they are going.													

Table 4. Mobile QQ messaging among four migrant workers.

#1	<i>xi wang canyuan yao guin yue zhou yue yuan</i> <i>zai man chang de lu shang wo men dou zai xun</i> <i>zhao zhe zi ji de meng</i> <i>xian shi de sheng huo shi wo men tong ku duo lou</i> <i>xin zhong de kun huo, sheng huo de bu mang</i> <i>rang wo men nian xing de xin tiao dong</i> <i>wo men zai tiao... tiao...</i> <i>taio chu zhe wu nai... ke liang de zi wo</i>	[We (Wa workers) hope] Wa Hip Hop can keep to its goals. In life's long journey, we are seeking our dreams. In real life, we suffer a lot and feel ourselves coming down in the world. We felt confused and were not content with the way things are. Let our young hearts jump forward. We are jumping... jumping... We are jumping to express that we have no alternative... a pitiful self.
#2	<i>Wa laoxiang! Wo zai gemang yaoguang jie</i> <i>shang ting guo le! Hai shi hao ting, ga!</i>	Wa homelander! I already heard this song once at the Hip Hop Festival in Gema. This song is great, Ga!
#3	<i>Ji nian mei you hui ke wo... cangyuan wan sui</i> ☺	I did not travel back to my Wa homeland for years... Cangyuan (the seat of a Wa County), Long Live ☺
#4	<i>Wa ge qu tai bang le, yaoshi neng yong pu</i> <i>tong hua lai cang, mei you cang yuan kou</i> <i>yin jiu geng hao</i>	The Wa hip hop songs are great. It would be much better if they could sing the songs in standard Mandarin Chinese without accents.

other young migrant worker returnees, this QQ blog was created by a former Wa factory worker who was intermittently employed in Shenzhen for around five years. Without a secure chance for job promotion at a factory, he decided to return to his hometown in 2009 to find a new job in the border regions of southwest China. Before his return, he only used his mobile phones to access to QQ Space and did not really know how to set up a personal blog. With the help of Wa college graduates in his hometown, he started to post photos and news about his Wa hometown and collect hip-hop songs created and sung by local Wa teenagers in a style of code-mixing between Wa and Yunnanese Chinese which is commonly used in the CWAC.

The first Wa migrant youth currently working in Shenzhen made comments on the blog. The second Wa worker started with the wording of 'wa laoxiang' (co-ethnic Wa people) to reconnect with his Wa fellow in the rural and then comments that 'I first heard this song at a local hip hop festival. The song is great'.

The second Wa worker adds the sound of 'ga' in the end of her mobile communication. The third Wa worker substitutes a standardized Chinese verb of 'qu' with 'ke', following the linguistic rule of a regional Chinese variety. Moreover, on the same QQ Space, the Wa workers noted that they were not surprised when one Han Chinese worker posted on the message board, saying 'the Hip Hop songs are great. It would be better, though, if they could sing the song in standard Chinese without accents'. This commentary echoes my findings that Wa migrant youth's mobile communication both resists and reasserts the hegemony of the dominant Chinese language ideology and language hierarchy. However, dominant Chinese language ideologies are multiple rather than singular reconstructed uniquely for each of the diversity of ethnic and language backgrounds in China. My research findings show that the dominant Chinese language ideology about standard Chinese writing is unique to the experiences of Wa migrants and their engagements with use of mobile phones and QQ. Their experiences with Chinese language ideology are reasserted and internalized by these Wa migrants as an integral part of their mobile communication.



## Conclusion

This article uses examples of mobile communications arising out of the emerging popularity of Wa working-class mobile networks and suggests there is much to be understood by attending to the issues of networked sociality and the domination of the Chinese language ideology in everyday contexts. My study shows the unique techno-social strategies and patterns of networked sociality shared by a group of young minority workers in the milieu of class subordination in urban China. It further suggests the importance of QQ networked sociality as both a resource and a form of technological potentiality for reconfiguring the dominant Chinese language ideology embedded in mobile communication which is ideally written in standard Chinese by Wa migrants. The voicing of their marked status is made possible through the connectivity with provincial homeland roots and inter(intra)ethnic ties.

Networked mobile communications (QQ Space and QQ Mobile) have become a dynamic field of mobile networking and social engagements in terms of socializing and information needs. At the same time, these mobile communications, I argue, become an ideological sphere in which the order and fragments of language hierarchy and associated language ideology of Chinese standardization impinge upon and layer cyber-networked experiences of non-native minority users.

My research demonstrates the theoretical significance of dominant language ideology and language hierarchy for unpacking the relationships between migration and mobile phone usage, and between networking and sociality. The significance of this research further lies in the technological potentiality and logics of ethnic minority migrants in making sense of telecommunication technology and digitally networked social media, and indicates the ways and contexts in which their sense of mobile engagements in the new terrain of a seemingly borderless digital world is continuously constituted by the domination of standard language practice. Finally, the externally adopted knowledge of mobile phone and communication technology is a dynamic platform of self-directed mobile networking and networked sociality which is partly driven by free-will and partly structure-constrained.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful for Janet D. Keller's support of my project focused on Wa youth's labor migration and mobile communication. Parts of this article were presented at the 2011 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting at the panel 'Tracing Mobile Language Practices across Digital Territories', at the 2013 Taiwan Society for Anthropology and Ethnology Annual Meeting, and at the 2014 Taiwan Society for Anthropology and Ethnology Annual Meeting at a panel 'New Media and Networked Sociality: Perspectives on the Human Condition and Digital Ethnography in Everyday Life'. I thank Alice Filmer, Kerim Friedman, Rob Moore, and Betsy Rymes for constructive suggestions to this research. I also thank Julie Yu-Wen Chen and two reviewers for comments on this article. Some of the data presented here were collected in a postdoctoral fellowship funded by the Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, Ministry of Science and Technology in Taiwan.

## Notes on contributor

Tzu-kai Liu, who received a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, is a part-time assistant professor at Department of Anthropology, National Taiwan University, and at Department of Southeast Asia, National Chi-Nan University. His publications include the following: 'Reconstructing Cultural Heritage: Imagining Wa Primitiveness in the China/Myanmar Borderlands,' in *Cultural Heritage Politics*, T. Blumenfield and H. Silverman, eds.

(Springer 2013); and *Planting a New House: Cultural Meanings of House Construction among the Wa in Yunnan, China* (Tangshan Publisher, 2004, in Chinese).

*Author's postal address:* Department of Anthropology, National Taiwan University, 1 Sec.4 Roosevelt Rd., Taipei, Taiwan.

## Notes

1. Breman, *Outcast Labor in Asia*; Pun, *Made in China*; and Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*.
2. According to the CWAC government's published materials on population census, in 2010, the ethnic Wa population in Cangyuan was approximately 145,000 (85%). The remaining populations are the ethnic groups of Han Chinese, Lahu, Dai and Yi.
3. See Lin and Tong, "Mobile Cultures of Migrant Workers in Southern China." Also see, Qiu, *Working-Class Network Society*; Wallis, "Mobile Phones without Guarantees"; Law and Peng, "Cellphones and the Social Lives"; and Florence, "Migrant Workers in the Pearl River Delta."
4. See Hutchby, *Conversation and Technology*. Also see Lee, "Affordances and Text-Making Practices."
5. See Castells, *Communication Power*; Castells et al., *Mobile Communication and Society*; and Donald, "Introduction."
6. See Horst and Miller, *The Cell Phone*. Also see Madianou and Miller, *Migration and New Media*.
7. There has been no official census on the total populations of minority migrant workers in Shenzhen and Dongguan. This number is based on unpublished data collected by the township offices of the Cangyuan County Government. It only represents the numbers of Wa migrant workers coming from Cangyuan County. This number is quite similar to my own collected data on Wa migrant workers even though some of these Wa workers migrate between these two cities and their Wa homelands, intermittently. Other Wa migrants and ethnic minority workers from other parts of China are not included in this data.
8. Wittel, "Toward a Network Sociality," 51.
9. Harbermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.
10. Langman, "From Virtual Public Spheres to Global Justice." Also see, Juris, "Reflection on #Occupy Everywhere."
11. See Qiu, *Working-Class Network Society*, 7.
12. See Wallis, *Technomobility in China*.
13. See Agha, "The Social Life of Cultural Value."
14. Pun, *Made in China*; Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle*; Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*; and Wallis, *Technomobility in China*.
15. See note 11 above.
16. See Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*; also see Zheng, *Technological Empowerment*.
17. See Chan, *The Challenge of Labour in China*.
18. Peng and Choi, "Mobile Phone Use among Migrant Factory Workers in South China."
19. See the discussion of Han Chinese workers in Qiu, "Working-class ICTs, Migrants, and Empowerment in South China." Also see the discussion of Han Chinese migrant women in Wallis, *Technomobility in China*.
20. See Zimmermann, "Redesigning Culture."
21. See Dong and Blommaert, "Space, Scale and Accents."
22. Also see boyd's study of MySpace, "Why Youth Love Social Network Sites."
23. Florence, "Migrant Workers in the Perl River Delta," 38. Also see Bach, "They Come in Peasants and Leave Citizens."
24. See Crystal, *Txng: The Gr8 Db8*. Also see Jones and Schieffelin, "Talking Text and Talking Back."
25. See the creative use of the Taiwanese writing system in Su, "The Multilingual and Multiorthographic Taiwan-Based Internet." Also see Danet and Herring, "Introduction."

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