

Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China, by Jack Linchuan Qiu. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009. 320 pp. \$37.00. ISBN 978-0262170062.

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"Do information and communication technologies (ICTs) help the poor or do they promote the interests of the rich? Do they reduce inequality, or make it more acute?" (1) This is the fundamental question that Jack Linchuan Qiu uses to inform his wide-ranging and fascinating investigation of the ICT landscape for the millions of urban working-class Chinese in Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China. In so doing, Qiu, associate professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, puts into question the utility of such widely adopted and heralded concepts as "the digital divide." For the past two decades, this predominant mainstream metaphor has framed a great deal of the discussion, investigation and debate around ICTs, particularly as the West has looked toward the societies of the global South. Its focus has traditionally been on providing material or physical access to ICTs, to the end of rectifying social inequities and providing economic empowerment to people who lack it (c.f. the One Laptop Per Child project). Yet, as Qiu demonstrates, using government data, empirical field research and rich analysis, informed by his personal knowledge of the contemporary urban Chinese socioeconomic and cultural context, the binary nature of the digital divide's ICT haves and have nots (and the attendant solutions designed to bridge them) increasingly do not accurately reflect the

modern complexities, nuances and paradoxes of a society undergoing rapid massive economic and political transformation – if they ever did at all.

Furthermore, such analyses have frequently failed to account for the ways in which people engage with ICTs outside of normative, expected or mainstream practices, as they do in the cases Qiu describes: tailoring them to their own needs, subscribing to alternative services at prices they can afford, or circulating outside the prescribed legal and market regimes to access and use ICTs necessary for daily urban life within China. He calls these types of ICTs users the “information have-less,” and they make up a massive stratum of contemporary Chinese urban society. In the context of Beijing alone, Qiu identifies fully 46.2% of respondents to a random-sample survey as belonging to this informational class (5).

Who are the “have-less” of urban China? They are a wide-ranging group of people made up of internal rural-to-urban migrants, retirees and senior citizens, microentrepreneurs and the un- and underemployed; collectively, they constitute the Chinese urban working-class. Any examination of their ICT practices, Qiu convincingly argues, must begin and end with a class-based analysis in order to properly situate them within the fabric of the post-Mao new Chinese urbanism and shifting economic realities of the past two decades. The period has been characterized by the rapid development of new internationally focused industrial zones such as such as Shenzhen, the massive rise of globalized electronics manufacturing and other ready-for-export industry, and the physical reorganization and resettlement of vast numbers of people due to urban planning efforts

and engineering of the environment on a scale difficult to comprehend (e.g. the Three Gorges Dam).

In Part 1, Qiu describes such spatial, geographic and economic reconfigurations that result in displacement and domestic migration – almost 150 million people, a third again as many as traverse international boundaries *between* countries worldwide (87) – as a sort of "Chinese Enclosure Movement" (88) that has forced a rural-to-urban exodus. Migrants arrive to urban centers, spaces of "flows – of people, goods and information" (87), with their own informational, labor and social needs. They then seek out and engage with ICTs that can meet those needs, either by repurposing more generalized forms or by using ICTs tailored, through cost structure or technology, to working-class users.

But Qiu's analysis of working-class ICT use is nuanced and unveils a level of paradox and trade-offs in working-class experiences of ICTs. Far from the promise and simplicity of the bridged digital divide, increased connectivity frequently comes at a cost, exposing the Chinese have-less, through their use of these ICTs or participation in the markets that create demand for them, to conditions of marginality, extra-legality and greater vulnerability to governmental surveillance, while complicating or exacerbating their own frequently precarious economic and labor status. These circumstances can arise, for example, when users must rely upon Internet access from the often questionably legal and stigmatized "black Net bars," or cybercafés of the lower-rent urban districts, treated at length in Chapter 2. While the black Net bars and cybercafés, the "commons of the have-less," according to Qiu (46), grant Internet access and access to computers that many working-class people otherwise might not have, they are also sites subject to extreme

regulation, government and private-entity surveillance and control, dictating terms of access and availability of content. Necessity has spawned innovative responses to the heavy content filtering in cybercafés, however; common practice involves Net bar web browsers set to open to IP address anonymizers as the default Internet browsing starting point, allowing patrons to escape the restrictions on content and to otherwise circumvent governmental limits imposed on and monitoring of access (34).

Presented in chapter 3, the case of wireless phone access for working-class Chinese is similarly complex: “To...have-less people, a mobile handset, or *shouji*, is often their first phone...[or] their first personal ICT device of any kind” (51). China has a significant domestic mobile phone industry; this, combined with market restructuring resulting in lower handset prices, the aftermarket reselling of used handsets at more affordable rates, and specialized alternate mobile connectivity services targeting the working-class with reduced coverage and lesser-quality service at lower subscription fees (e.g., the “Little Smart” Wireless Local Loop mobile service) has resulted in China having the most mobile subscribers of any nation in the world (67). Yet, notes Qiu, possession of the handset may really only be the beginning of relentless solicitations for costly and often-unnecessary services and SMS-based scams designed to extract money from working-class users. Working-class users are engaged at all points in the life cycle of wireless mobile products, frequently responsible for their manufacture or resale. They then use the wages they earn in those labor processes to purchase and maintain the handsets they may have made themselves, redirecting relatively large sums of their income back to the mobile companies that meet working-class demand or expressly target working-class users for their services.

Mobile handsets and other ICTs can serve, too, as a form of “wireless leash,” used by employers and other élites to control workers and their informational flow outside the confines of the production floor (186), particularly to avoid or disrupt worker use of ICTs for labor organization and resistance. In this way, material access to ICTs once again proves complex and paradoxical for working-class people.

Throughout the book, Qiu demonstrates the many ways in which ICTs play a central and critical role in the lives of the urban Chinese working-class. Chapter 4 deals with the political and economic causes of domestic migration. Qiu also describes the cases of several individual and groups of rural-to-urban migrant workers who engage in grassroots organizing and resistance using blogs, websites and SMS-texting - frequently pushing limits of the tolerance of the state for such activities (122). In Chapter 5, “Old and Young,” Qiu addresses ICT use among working-class youth – greatly defined by Chinese “One Child” social policy. He also uncovers the impact of commercialization of social services and the intersection of ICT solutions designed to address the needs of the elderly, a population frequently ignored in the context of Internet, mobile and ICT access and use.

In Part III, referencing the work of frequent collaborator and prologue-author Manuel Castells (Castells 2000), Qiu focuses on geospatial reconfigurations that have engendered the rise of the new Chinese urban working-class, focusing on the globalized economic practices responsible for the creation, growth and reorganization of the places where these populations both live and work. Chapter 7’s focus on “Life and Death” examines the potentially mortal repercussions of the intersections of life and ICT use on the margins. Working-class people have been the targets of ICT-based economic crime and

exploitation (theft of mobile handsets) and have been vulnerable to unsafe conditions in black Net bars and in ICT-related labor.

Is ICT access and use for Chinese urban working-class people liberating or limiting? Qiu's traversal of the gamut of working-class experience to examine the impact of ICT usage in their lives suggests that such use cannot be easily summed up as solely transformative in a positive way; likewise, it is not solely used to reify extant social status and power relations in contemporary China. Ultimately, any tendency to draw simplified conclusions, based on digital divide-influenced binaries of material access or lack, about the function, potential and meaning of ICTs for working-class populations must be resisted, in favor of more nuanced and complex interventions of the type that Qiu offers. Qiu's discussion is a thoughtful contribution to ongoing work underway by Zhao (2008), among others, around ICTs, labor, power, and control and should find an audience with scholars looking for meaningful ways to engage with and draw attention to these issues in China as well as globally.

REFERENCES

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