Chapter 8

Mobile Phones, Diasporas and Developing Countries:
A Case Study of Connectedness among Chinese in Italy

Graeme Johanson
Monash University, Australia

Tom Denison
Monash University, Australia

ABSTRACT

It is no coincidence that the mobile phone suits the lifestyle and needs of the mobile migrant worker well. Research into the role of mobile or cell phones by Chinese migrant labourers, migrating within and outside China, show that the phones are a survival device, a means to perpetuate an important sense of belonging to a community in virtual form, and a method of transferring resources back to poor parts of the homeland. Mobiles help to cope in a foreign culture and to find work and ethnic solidarity. Above all, they provide connectedness. This chapter summarises the findings of a survey of 74 Chinese migrants living in Prato, Italy, as an example of Chinese migrants in Europe. It was administered in late 2008. Prato as a province has the largest Chinese migrant population in Italy, numbering about 30,000. The research aimed to understand the usefulness of mobile phones to migrant residents who need to keep in touch with their friends and families, in China and Italy, and their other communication needs, and whether mobiles satisfy their expectations. Participants in this study are well-served by mobiles. The typical participant in the study was a recently-arrived young single male from Zhejiang, China, speaking Wenzhouese, but with proficiency in other languages, experiencing the novelty of using a recently-purchased 'Nokia' phone, and who, whilst spending more than 10 Euros a month on the phone for keeping in touch with friends in China, was very aware of mobile running costs. More research is planned to flesh out the findings further.

CHINESE MIGRANTS AND DEVELOPMENT

It is a moot point as to whether China is a 'developing' or 'developed' country. There is certainly no doubt that Chinese migrants play an essential role in its development. The 50 million or so Chinese migrants who live outside their country (IOM 2008), and the 225 million migrants who work in Chinese cities, separated from their rural villages (PRC 2009), are attracted to new places of work by higher wages. In Italy a local worker in 2006 was paid more on average per hour than a Chinese urban worker in China received in a week (Finfacts 2009). The number of emigrant workers from China around the globe is enormous; there is a Chinese saying that 'there are Chinese people wherever the ocean waves touch.' (Fullilove 2008: vii, 18). The International Office of Migration points out that

The Government of China has … creat[ed] an enabling environment for the overseas Chinese to get involved in the economic development of China. Mobile or cell phones follow the trajectory of the massive migrations. China is the largest consumer in the world of mobiles (Donner 2008:145).

Mobile phones support a two-way synchronous communication channel for the Chinese diaspora to keep in touch with its homelands, whilst at the same time enabling negotiation of survival in host countries, and assisting migrants to exchange personal messages, photos and funds (Zhang 2009: 261) with their kith and kin all over the world. In a study of disoriented migrant workers in China, Chu and Yang wrote:

The use of cell phones somewhat bolsters their self-esteem. After all, there is no other consumer durable than the cell phone that can be held in the hand and that will allow them to demonstrate their feelings, confirm their sense of freedom, and

assure their existence as [an agent] in a rootless time-space (Chu 2006:230).

Large quantities of remittances are sent from migrant labourers to hometowns. Each year China receives more than any other developing country with billions of dollars from its overseas migrants (Page 2005:10,57), for altruistic reasons, as a form of family insurance, and as an investment (migration life-cycle planning) (Page 2005:15). These various fund transfers benefit the local economy of the developing country in multiple ways (Page 2005: 18). In addition to remittances, there are a large number of direct donations (often undocumented officially) to home communities (Xiaolv 2009:261-262).

The benefits which derive from the use of the mobile phone are not simply economic. The power of mobile communication to reduce isolation and loneliness cannot be overestimated, as indicated by a report derived from thorough fieldwork among female migrant workers in Beijing:

Social capital … has been strongly connected to mobile phone use … Understand the role of the mobile phone in migrant women's sociality … They work[ed] extremely long hours … some without ever having a day off … Work schedules are frequently extended by the constant pressure to work overtime … Contributing to this small social world is the fact that most … tend[ed] to live in tiny apartments or dormitories with as many as 18 to a room … The mobile was a key to enriching their social relationships. Many friendships were maintained strictly through a mobile phone (Wallis 2007:11-12).

A sense of belonging to a community (whether virtual or real) and concomitant improvement of quality of life are reinforced by mobile phone use. A study of the role of Information and Communications Technologies in the quality of life of people in Beijing, Taipei and Hong Kong concluded that

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