

## 1. New voices



# Emotions, entrepreneurship and globalisation: the petit capitalism of migrant women between China and Taiwan

New voices

04 March 2022

On the backroads, hidden inside a suitcase, invisible to border controls, a fluorescent orange bra made in a textile factory in Southern China crosses the Strait and arrives in Taiwan. There, it wanders and circulates, on physical and digital platforms, and then returns to its place of production in China. Studying the mobility of this particular object allows us to interrogate the social and emotional journeys of its producers: young female workers from rural Chinese regions who first migrate to towns within China for work, and then marry in order to travel to Taiwan for work later.

Research participants

- Beatrice Zani

## New Voices Awards 2021

**Thesis title :** Mobilities, Translocal Economies, and Emotional Modernity. From the Factory to Digital Platforms, between China and Taiwan

**Country :** France

**University :** Université Lumières Lyon 2

**Date :** 2019

**Research supervisor :** Laurence Roulleau-Berger

**1. What is your research theme? What thesis do you defend and how does it stand out?**

By studying the journey of a bra produced in China and the women who produced it, the interplay between the mobility and immobility of people and goods in a contemporary world characterised by both globalisation and digitalisation is made visible. Migratory women cross several social, economic and moral barriers –cities, the labour market and the domestic and family space. They cross the borders of hierarchical, inegalitarian and rigid normative regimes, where mobility is constrained by legislation limiting the rights of migrants or imposing marriage as a necessary condition for movement. These mobilities are also constructed in a space-time that is highly influenced by the immediacy of mass telecommunication. The near and the far are redefined by the instantaneousness of communication, the transnational hyperconnection of people's mobilities, whether physical or digital. In their quest to improve their social condition, the women in this research have developed skills that are in many ways similar to forms of motility, giving them great agility in their spatial mobility. This thesis defends the idea that these women can emancipate themselves from their subalternity by developing complex strategies in their physical and virtual mobility, throughout their migrations.

## **2. If your thesis involves empirical research, what does it consist of?**

The survey is based on an 18-month multi-sited survey in rural and urban areas in China and Taiwan, where more than 140 biographical interviews with young migrant women were conducted, as well as a digital ethnography of the dematerialised mobilities in online WeChat groups.

## **3. What are the main results?**

The research clearly shows that these women's ability to move around, which combines strong skills in reversible mobility, coupled with a capacity to uproot and re-settle (which is required for migrating) allows them to develop new ways of life. By connecting the different spatialities and temporalities of their mobilities in China and Taiwan, through physical and virtual movements, migrant women set up a plurality of material and immaterial practices, both virtual and emotional, which allow them to resist local and global hierarchies and the inequalities encountered in migration. Thus, within the microcosm of their daily lives, the women under analysis bypass the laws of the local market and explore global markets, giving rise to unique forms of mobility through temporalities and spatialities that are accelerated by digital platforms. Online, alongside women's mobilities, objects, information, packages and emotions circulate. Their journeys retrace the migratory biographies of these women in China, then in Taiwan.

Through online apps, they produce transnational entrepreneurship. The digital app WeChat is becoming a commercial infrastructure, through which women contact customers and business partners, located in China and Taiwan. They advertise products, send images and take orders; but they can also easily transfer and receive money online, via the payment functions. The products on offer can vary: clothing, jewellery, food, cosmetics, medication. These are products that have a strong emotional dimension: they are often imported from China and have an "authentic taste" that allows women to overcome negative emotions of uprooting and nostalgia that accompany the migratory experience. But they can also embody the modernity and consumerism that these women seek through their mobility, generating emotions of ambition, motivation and joy. These digital business and entrepreneurial practices then take the form of an "emotional petit capitalism" – a kind of capitalism that is scarcely visible, produced in the spaces of women's daily life and work. It is petit because it takes discreet forms, scarcely visible and digitised. It is emotional because the traded goods generate emotions in the process of buying and selling them.

At the end of the analysis, it appears that the bra's journey and movements, which embody the aspirations to modernity and are tracked in this research, constitute the framework within which the migratory experiences, digital mobilities and economic and emotional practices of Chinese migrant women are built. Meanwhile, the small transnational emotional capitalism of women constitutes the

mutable, malleable and polyhedral substance of globalisation. In that respect, the backroads, journeys and paths of digital economies can merge and mix with the main roads of global markets. The roads taken by the industrial products resold by these women are digital, less visible, but hierarchically no less important than those of the large, globalised distribution system: globalisation then reveals itself in its plural forms.

## **4. What is your contribution to political and theoretical debates?**

This research clearly shows the value of analysing lifestyles and mobilities together in both their physical and digital dimensions. It demonstrates that the different forms of mobility truly form a system: it is impossible to describe and understand these women's journeys without looking at their practices on social networks, their daily mobilities and their migrations. The mobility system they become a part of is made up of physical mobilities of course, at different spatial and temporal scales, but also of everything related to remote communication and digital technology.

But the real originality of the research lies elsewhere still: it invites us to consider the social dimension of mobility in the aptitude for self-transformation. Beyond the spatial journeys of women and their productions, what is striking in this research - and what constitutes its central contribution to mobility issues - is the tremendous ability of these women to transform themselves while travelling through space. If they ultimately manage to improve their social condition, it is in large part thanks to their ability to manipulate and break the rules. They do not hesitate to get married in order to reach Taiwan, or to bypass local markets to develop their petit capitalism. Indeed, they develop very astute and thought-out mobility skills.

Through these findings, the thesis reminds us that the geographical displacement involved in spatial mobilities is not an end in itself. Rather, if one moves, it is first and foremost to improve one's condition, to escape a fate that seems dull, and ultimately to be able to live rather than merely survive.

## **5. What new research avenues do your conclusions open up?**

At the end of this research, it is conceivable that these women's journeys, as well as the bra's trajectory, can reveal the micro-social contours of the global transformations of mobility, the transnational economy and capitalism. It is on this hypothesis that I can now propose new research avenues. Oriented towards the East, new poles of world capitalism could emerge. Singapore is probably among these, and we can speculate about others. This is a challenge for future studies on globalisation. The old European continent is becoming increasingly marginal, as are the Western centres of the world economy. The bra's journey is an invitation to imagine the future, in its complexity and plurality. It invites us to "look East" when we study globalisation and capitalism. But to do this, future ethnographies must go beyond the spatial and temporal limits of working on a single site, to produce more comparative research. This is probably one of the most successful ways to understand the multi-site nodes and networks between people, the places and hubs that collaborate or compete with each other and that extend across the globe.

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***Mobilities, Translocal Economies, and Emotional Modernity.***

***From the Factory to Digital Platforms, between China and Taiwan***



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## **Mobility**

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication

industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

## Motility

En savoir plus x

## Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

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### Associated Thematics :

#### Lifestyles

- Aspirations
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Digital technologies
- Work

#### Theories

- Concepts

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