

Migration Infrastructures in the Digital Age: The Transformative Role and Limits of ICTs in Post-COVID-19 Irregular Chinese Migration to the United States

This paper examines how information and communication technologies (ICTs) have (re)shaped migration infrastructures by challenging, complementing, and partially replacing traditional, tightly knit yet exclusive migration networks and migration intermediaries in facilitating (irregular) global Chinese migration. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 31 irregular Chinese migrants who recently crossed the US-Mexico border without authorization, also known in the Chinese diaspora as *zouxian* migrants, this study analyses how ICT use shaped their migration aspirations, capabilities, transit journeys across Latin America, and initial settlement in the US. The findings show that ICTs enhanced *zouxian* migrants' "digital capability to aspire" and their capabilities to migrate (even) to the US by providing more affordable and inclusive access to migration-related information and resources that were historically controlled by established migration networks and intermediaries. During transit, ICT use reduced risks and costs by facilitating real-time information sharing and communication among *zouxian* migrants, thereby decreasing their reliance on intermediaries. After arrival, ICT use helped *zouxian* migrants secure housing, employment, and legal assistance, thereby complementing or partly replacing traditional migration networks in facilitating initial settlement. However, ICT use has unintended consequences and limitations in (re)shaping migration infrastructures. While it makes global mobility appear more achievable, migrants may be left underprepared for victimization in transit countries and migrant precarity in the host society. Moreover, heavy reliance on digital social spaces may reinforce their social isolation and marginalization within both ethnic communities and mainstream society as well as constrain social mobility. Furthermore, migration networks cannot be fully replaced by ICTs as they provide the practical and emotional support that is critical for upward mobility and well-being. By exploring the complex roles of ICTs in facilitating irregular Chinese migration, this paper contributes to the growing scholarship on migration infrastructures, the digital mediation of migration, and the Chinese diaspora.