

Lu Wang, 2025

University of Cambridge, Sociology

Abstract:

*Socio-spatial Mobility of Technology Workers during the "Tech Exodus" in China's Internet Industry*

Labour migration research has long been characterised by a developmentalist optimism, viewing spatial mobility primarily as a means to achieve upward social mobility. Whereas, through an investigation of tech workers' socio-spatial mobility in China, this thesis argues that spatial mobility is not merely a means to an end. Conversely, individuals are forgoing certain aspirations for upward social mobility in exchange for the freedom of spatial (im)mobility. Over the past decade, leading Chinese technology companies have relocated from megacities to emerging regions to reduce costs, giving rise to a Chinese variant of the "tech exodus" – involving the dispersal of digital jobs and tech workers seeking better prospects and more affordable lives. This research examines the establishment of trans-local labour control regimes and the socio-spatial mobility of tech workers, addressing three primary questions: 1. How does "tech exodus" empower or constrain tech workers' socio-spatial mobility? 2. How do tech workers cultivate spatial mobility power during employment-related migration? 3. How does the "tech exodus" impact receiving societies and reshape the spatial distribution of labour in China's tech industry? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two Chinese cities, this research conceptualises tech workers' autonomy in strategizing career transitions across trans-local labour markets as "spatial mobility power". This concept integrates insights from both labour geography and labour process theories, illustrating tech workers' lived experiences of navigating between professional pursuits and reproductive demands under the conditions of ever-expanding capitalism.