

Rajiv George Aricat and Rich Ling, **Mobile Communication and Low-Skilled Migrants' Acculturation to Cosmopolitan Singapore**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018, 235 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover), \$90.00 (e-book).

Reviewed by
Mai Nou Xiong-Gum
Furman University, USA

In 1965, Singapore exited from Malaysia and became an independent state that would excel in economic growth. In the earlier years, Lee Kuan Yew of the People's Action Party served as the first prime minister with two ambitious goals that would bring on Singapore's economic growth and success (Mauzy & Milne, 2002). First, Lee Kuan Yew and the permanent secretary, Hon Sui Sen, selectively welcomed multinational corporations (MNCs)—unlike other developing countries who avoided MNCs for fear of exploitation of natural resources. Second, Lee Kuan Yew encouraged higher standards in health, education, transportation, and telecommunication infrastructure. Since then, cosmopolitan Singapore has experienced a thriving economy, but as Aricat and Ling have pointed out, Singapore has lagged behind in its population growth (p. 2). To ensure the country's economic performance in light of this, the government has long instituted an immigration policy that welcomed cross-border migrants into the low-skilled labor sector, but this comes with its own set of complications. Although, this policy does not exactly address the population growth concern, it does fulfill a necessary population gap that is the low-skilled labor force, which is crucial for sustained economic growth. For example, as of 2016, Singaporean citizens made up about 61% of the total population (Yang, Yang, & Zhan, 2017). This policyacerbates the cultural identities of cross-border migrants by welcoming them but always reminding them that they are transients, even though some do work up to an average duration of thirteen years (p. 17). Because of expectations to perform national identity, cross-border migrant workers are expected to acculturate without assimilating. It is at this intersection that Aricat and Ling begin to look at mobile communication practices as a way for cross-border migrants to exist within this emporium.



In **Mobile Communication and Low-Skilled Migrants' Acculturation to Cosmopolitan Singapore**, Aricat and Ling highlight the social tension that low-skilled cross-border migrants face in Singapore. Apart from social and economic disadvantages, many of these migrants come from the rural areas of Bangladesh and India that complicate the narrative of progress and development that Singapore champions—which Aricat and Ling elaborate on in their discussion of ICTs and the digital divide (p. 25). In this case, the digital divide refers to migrants' differential access to information communication technologies (ICTs). Nonetheless, Aricat and Ling identify ICTs in general and mobile phone use in particular as cross-border migrants' methods of acculturating to Singaporean society while maintaining cultural ties to their respective home countries. As part of their rationale, the authors explain that "mobile phones are being increasingly adopted by migrants at the low-income strata" (p. 10), and they serve as a primary source of

information and networking for newcomers, particularly in the absence of ethnic news media outlets that would service newcomers (p. 55).

In doing so, this study extends the scholarship on mobile communication studies among migrants in a meaningful way by focusing on “male” users. In the past, studies have analyzed transnational mobile communications in terms of migrant parenting (Madianou & Miller, 2011), migrant mothering (Chib, Malik, Aricat, & Kadir, 2014), or female migrant workers and social mobility (Wallis, 2011), but few studies have focused narrowly on male migrants—until now, that is. However, beyond this reason, Aricat and Ling did not clearly explain why they narrowed the focus to male users. In fact, their research questions do not mention male migrants specifically. For instance, “How does acculturation attitude influence adaptation outcomes of migrants in different life domains” or “How does mobile phone communication lead to migrant adaptation...” (p. 13). Additionally, the findings of their study are not specifically discussed in relation to the specific positions that male, cross-border, low-skill workers occupy (p. 148). For example, in the research on transnational families, Dreby (2010) found that women and men engaged in similar activities when parenting children from afar. While other studies that examined migrant fathering expressed that there are power geometries among gender and social relations (Kilkey, Plomien, & Perrons, 2014). Namely, when a father withholds sending money to his children, it is viewed as a disciplinary move, but the same is rarely conceived of mothers. But this is to say that Aricat and Ling could have considered how gender might play into the dynamics that they examined to better demonstrate their understanding of power relations. To this end, their most significant contribution is their analysis of cultural adaptation in relation to their acculturation and appropriation model (p. 63).

Aricat and Ling do not focus on theories of assimilation, which assumes that a migrant will remain in the new country. For instance, if a migrant knows they have to remain in a new country indefinitely, they will assimilate and adapt to their new ways of life, perhaps by having to change things about themselves. Instead, Aricat and Ling focus on *acculturation* (Kim, 1977), which is an aspect of assimilation that allows a migrant to “blend in” without having to change themselves. In this manner, acculturation is similar to having cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) that would allow migrants to create thirdspaces of fluid and dynamic belonging.

As a major move, Aricat and Ling apply acculturation theory to the circular model of mobile phone appropriation (Wirth, von Pape, & Karnowski, 2008) and the appropriation theories developed by Bar, Weber, and Pisani (2016) and de Souza e Silva and colleagues (2011) to argue that the use of mobile communication by migrant workers maintains familial relations in home countries and relations in host countries. They explain that the process of appropriation is similar to the process of acculturation because both attend to how individuals make changes to acclimate to their given situations. For instance, a mobile phone appropriation can be as simple as altering the ring tone without having to change the device altogether, or it can be as dramatic as creating a makeshift battery. Within their analysis, the mobile phone becomes an agent for creating spaces in which migrants can acculturate to their host countries while maintaining their core cultural identities. Because of the absence of ethnic media, information communicated through mobile phones helps cross-border migrants function between and among multiple ethnicities.

Aricat and Ling explain that appropriation theories try to account for the cultural determinants of use and the social and cultural meanings ascribed to the uses. Doing so addresses the complexities involved in meaning making and user-technology interaction (p. 32). With this informing their methods of using questionnaires and interview data, they produced a typology of acculturation (p. 139): the culture campaigner, the culture connoisseur, and the cultural conservative. These types of users resemble that of Wirth and associates' (2008) typologies of mobile phone users: obtrusive multi-user, relationship manager, trendy cell-phone-player, everyday-life-manager, and discreet light-user. Both sets of typologies describe patterns of behavior with mobile phones, except that Aricat and Ling narrow in on describing a more specific demographic of users—that being low-skilled and cross-border migrant workers. Moreover, they included portions of their interview data, which was a pleasure to read because it offered nuances to the generalizing that is inevitable in the making of typologies. Nevertheless, the concepts of acculturation and appropriation make the book useful for understanding the link between mobile phone use and cultural hybridity in relation to cross-border migrants.

In short, Aricat and Ling demonstrate that acculturation and appropriation are both strategies that are used to engage with the host society. Communication inside and outside of Singaporean society is crucial for both processes of acculturation and appropriation because cultural identities can have fluidity while mobile devices gain new purpose and meaning in the lives of cross-border migrants who are likely to be steadily transient and there to fulfill economic goals for a country that is not their own. Aricat & Ling, in the end, show that mobile phone appropriation by cross-border migrant workers is one way in which national identities can be coperformed or hybridized.

References

- Bar, F., Weber, M., & Pisani, F. (2016). Mobile technology appropriation in a distant mirror: Baroquization, creolization, and cannibalism. *New Media & Society, 18*(4), 617–636.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chib, A., Malik, S., Aricat, R. G., & Kadir, S. Z. (2014). Migrant mothering and mobile phones: Negotiations of transnational identity. *Mobile Media & Communication, 2*(1), 73–93.
- de Souza e Silva, A., Sutko, D., Salis, F., de Souza e Silva, C., Salis, F. A., & de Souza e Silva, C. (2011). Mobile phone appropriation in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *New Media & Society, 13*(3), 411–426.
- Dreby, J. (2010). *Divided by borders: Mexican migrants and their children*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kilkey, M., Plomien, A., & Perrons, D. (2014). Migrant men's fathering narratives, practices and projects in national and transnational spaces: Recent Polish male migrants to London. *International Migration, 52*(1), 178–191.

Kim, Y. Y. (1977). Communication patterns of foreign immigrants in the process of acculturation. *Human Communication Research, 4*(1), 66–77.

Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2011). Mobile phone parenting: Reconfiguring relationships between Filipina migrant mothers and their left-behind children. *New Media & Society, 13*(3), 457–470.

Mauzy, D. K., & Milne, R. S. (2002). *Singapore politics under the people's action party*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Wallis, C. (2011). Mobile phones without guarantees: The promises of technology and the contingencies of culture. *New Media & Society, 13*(3), 471–485.

Wirth, W., von Pape, T., & Karnowski, V. (2008). An integrative model of mobile phone appropriation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*(3), 593–617.

Yang, H., Yang, P., & Zhan, S. (2017). Immigration, population, and foreign workforce in Singapore: An overview of trends, policies, and issues. *HSSE, 6*(1), 10–25.