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Telecommuting Amid Covid-19: The Governmobility of Work-from-home Employees in Hong Kong

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**Telecommuting amid Covid-19:
The Governmobility of Work-from-home Employees in Hong Kong
YEUNG Hiu Ling**

Since Covid-19 started to ravage the world in the early 2020. To cut the chain of virus transmission, a variety of social control and mobility restriction measures had been imposed on societies. Work, as one of the most essential daily activities, was then carried out in unconventional and flexible ways. In many places, telecommuting became the new normal, turning the world into a large work-from-home laboratory, with flows of digitalized documents, conversations and transactions replacing spatial movement and face-to-face communication to maintain productive activities during the unprecedented crisis. Would telecommuting change the conventional practices and power relations in the workplace? How would new communication and surveillance means maintain the collaboration and productivity of workers? How are employees (self-)governed and how do they flexibly respond to new opportunities and constraints in a teleworking environment? Answers to those questions remain a void in the literature but are critical to a better understanding of the nature and prospects of telecommuting, which has been significantly popularized during the pandemic. To bridge the gap, this research investigates the (im)mobile practices and experiences of working-from-home employees in Hong Kong through the theoretical lens of governmobility. The empirical data was collected in the far-flung community of Tin Shui Wai (TSW) in the Northwest New Territories of Hong Kong. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from June to August 2020 with TSW residents who were working from home or in other unconventional ways. Ethnography and discourse analysis were used to explore how telecommuting employees were (self-)governed through (im)mobility amid the pandemic. The results suggest that telecommuting was facilitated by new social interaction mechanisms, new power relations and new discourse and surveillance means, which were contingent upon the specific types of work and home conditions. Governmobility manifests itself in diverse telecommuting (im)mobile experiences which are categorized into three main types, namely, (i) “commuting” to the home office, (ii) working in the virtual workspace, and (iii) working as a body-device “cyborg”. They reflect flexible responses to new opportunities and constraints in telecommuting and demonstrate varied ways and degrees to which work and life are blended in space and time.

Keywords: telecommuting; Covid-19; governmobility; work from home; Hong Kong