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# Socio-Cultural Aspects of Mobile Communication Technologies in Asia and the Pacific: A Discussion of the Recent Literature

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Socio-Cultural Aspects of Mobile Communication Technologies in Asia and the Pacific:  
A Discussion of the Recent Literature

Mark McLelland

David Gauntlett, in his foreword to *Japanese Cybercultures*, notes the tendency in the Anglophone west to ‘assume that people in other countries, using other languages, are probably doing things with Internet technology that are *pretty similar* to those applications we are familiar with’ (Gauntlett, 2003, p. xii; emphasis in the original). However, as that collection goes on to make clear, particularly regarding mobile Internet applications, this is not always the case.

As a researcher with a background in Japanese studies, in an attempt to help undergraduate students think critically about the inter-relationship between society, culture and (new) technologies, I try to encourage them to consider that technologies have a history and that the meanings underlying their deployment are highly culture specific. Until recently the (now ubiquitous and quotidian) mobile phone was a helpful example to use. However, this particular technological innovation is becoming increasingly difficult to debate in class, since few students can remember a time before mobile phones and not one grew up in a household (as I did) where the land-line telephone was a seldom-used late arrival. (My mother first rented one solely for ‘emergencies’ which we thankfully had precious few of. Accordingly, that original phone set lasted my family for 20 years).

My students look at me with blank expressions when I point out that at the end of the nineteenth century, for instance, the telephone was regarded by people in ‘society’ as a proletarian device, to be used by servants to telephone orders to florists and department stores; or that Proust seldom used it (preferring along with other educated persons to communicate via letter). Indeed, in *In Search of Lost Time*, although the narrator occasionally uses the telephone to call up the theatre and listen to a live performance of an opera or a play (a now forgotten service offered to early subscribers), it would never

have occurred to him to have a personal conversation via such an uncouth medium. (Just imagine Marcel thinking ‘I’ll give Albertine a ring and see what’s she’s up to’.) Flash forward to today’s permanently wired ‘socialite’ to understand how our definitions of ‘society’ and the modes of communication considered appropriate between its members have changed. This example, as well as others from Proust, including his astonishment at the time/space compression brought about by new transport mechanisms such as the railroad and the automobile are useful in underlining the mutually constitutive relationships that exist between ‘the everyday consciousness of ordinary people’ and the technologies that surround them (*see* Berger et al., 1973).

I also try to get my students to think about the particularities of different technologies, how they signify in different geographical locations and among different social groups, through introducing case studies from other societies in our region. The mobile phone is one gadget that always catches their attention. However, despite some new and important work that has recently been published about Japanese mobile communications, we are still awaiting a good general overview of mobile communications (and other related ‘new media’) in the Asia-Pacific region that does not constantly refer the reader back to the primacy of European or North-American models. Likewise there is no overview that attempts to theorise regional influences and flows such as the immense impact that Japanese and Korean technologies have had on the Chinese market as well as the developing markets of South-East Asia.

Why is this so? Castells et al. (2004), in *The Mobile Communication Society: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Available Evidence on the Social Uses of Wireless Communication Technology*, the broadest comparative survey of mobile communications media so far available, notes the many difficulties involved in producing a useful overview of new mobile technologies on a global scale. The variety of languages in which mobile communication takes place and in which research is done is obviously formidable, but even more so is the pace at which the development and spread of these devices is taking place; it is almost impossible to keep up. Indeed, as Castells et al. point out, although it is clear to researchers that the uptake of these technologies will have profound and diverse

effects in different regions, ‘which kind of effects, under which conditions, for whom and for what is an open question’ (Castells et al., 2004, p. 2). These are obviously complex and nuanced issues that require detailed field work and case studies—still sadly lacking for the majority of Asian societies (with the notable exception of Ito et al.’s excellent collection on Japan, to be discussed in more detail below).

Given the expensive and time-consuming nature of such research, there is a tendency for researchers to offer data about the penetration rate of new technologies and the demographics of their use as well as descriptions of the technologies themselves and relevant business and government policies. However, as Castells et al. point out, ‘the diffusion of wireless communication proceeds so fast that purely descriptive data rapidly becomes obsolete’ (Castells et al., 2004, p. 2) and it is for this reason that Rao and Mendoza’s *Asia Unplugged: the Wireless and Mobile Media Boom in the Asia-Pacific*, despite having the most seemingly useful title, is the least helpful of recent publications when it comes to teaching about mobile communications in the region. The editors of the collection have brought together over 21 authors who are largely industry specialists and journalists rather than academics and the discussion seems mainly targeted at a business and technology audience. Although the chapters offer details about what technology is available where, analyses of evolving regional and country-specific markets and services, and assessments of the impact that government policies have had on the unequal distribution of mobile media throughout the region, there is too little analysis of the very specific socio-economic contexts that have led to divergent and contrasting uptake of mobile communications in different parts of the region.

The volume is subtitled a *handbook* and this is the best way to use it – as a resource to dip into for quick, data-rich surveys of particular countries since the density of data and number of charts and tables makes it a difficult read for those looking for a more discursive introduction to the issues. A cultural and media studies audience would find the discussion to be lacking in the amount of attention paid to social and cultural factors. Much of the language is hyperbolic; we read of the ‘broadband tidal wave phenomenon’ that is sweeping South Korea, a country which has pioneered mobile handsets of

‘astounding’ sophistication – but no sense is given of why (other than proactive government policies) the Korean population should have been so receptive to this technology as consumers. The treatment of the widespread popularity of mobile phone use among young Japanese consumers is similarly lacking in insight. The book’s chapters are full of relevant and useful statistics but the cultural background that has led to certain patterns of usage in one society and a different pattern of usage in others is not investigated.

We need to look elsewhere for answers to these questions and in this brief overview, I propose to introduce some recent sources that offer a range of essays, papers and reports that might help us gauge some of the regional similarities as well as specific differences in the uptake of mobile communications in societies throughout the Asia-Pacific region over the last decade. The main drawback of this selection is that the ‘Asia’ that is represented (as in much of the other literature that attempts to look beyond European or North-American paradigms) tends to refer primarily to Japan, Korea, China, and to a lesser extent, the Philippines. Australia, too, falls off the map in these collections, despite being one of the most wired societies in the wider region.

Of all these texts, Castells et al.’s *The Mobile Communication Society* is the most useful in setting up the basic research approach, an approach which is sensitive to local contexts and developments and that tries not to prioritise ‘western’ models. Indeed, as the authors of the report point out: ‘Our emphasis on a cross-cultural approach comes essentially from our intention to avoid cultural ethnocentrism in building the argument’ (Castells et al., 2004, p. 2). Castells et al. survey mobile uptake in Europe, North America and Pacific Asia, ‘the three areas of the world where wireless communication is most developed (save Australia)’ (Castells et al., 2004, p. 2) and are aware that their report overlooks Africa, South America and large parts of Asia. However, based on the regions that are considered, the authors pinpoint four very general trends that characterise mobile communications uptake. These are, firstly, the ‘deep connection’ between wireless communication and the development of a ‘mobile youth culture’; secondly, the transformation of language via texting and multimodality; thirdly, the impact of wireless

communication on socio-political activism and finally, changes in the experience of time and space. These trends are indeed apparent in many of the studies of Asia-Pacific societies offered in the texts under discussion but, as might be expected, there are no identifiable multi-regional 'Asian' characteristics, each trend being inflected by very specific local factors.

Regarding the uptake of mobile communications, Castells et al. note that 'The United States lags behind Europe and Japan and Japan is ahead of Europe in the uses of the wireless Internet' (Castells et al., 2004, p. 2). Indeed, 'A broad consensus has been formed that the usage of *keitai* [mobile phones], including especially the myriad wireless Internet applications, is central to the transformation of the Japanese information society', and that this usage represents 'a process significantly distinct from the development of the computer-based Internet in other countries' (Castells et al., 2004, p. 103). It is no surprise then, for researchers looking for paradigms of both Internet and mobile communications development that disrupt normative US and European patterns, it is usually Japanese examples that are invoked. Although researchers working on Japanese society have long been wary of claims of Japanese exceptionalism, as far as mobile phones (in Japanese, *keitai*) are concerned, there is a clear body of evidence that shows how this particular technology has developed in Japan in a manner quite divergent and distinct from mobile telephony in other regions.

While not 'unique' to Japan (since Japanese patterns of usage are similar in some respects to South Korea—although far less attention has been paid to this important regional centre), it is clear that pre-existing Japanese cultural norms and practices have exerted a strong influence on the development of *keitai* technology and its deployments. In Ito et al.'s *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, so-far the only comprehensive analysis of mobile telecommunications in Japan, the editors are right to insist on referring to Japanese cell/mobile phones by their Japanese moniker, *keitai*, in order to underline the cultural specificity of this technology, its design, functions, uses and meanings – emphasizing its role as 'an artifact located in a specific national context' (Matsuda, 2005, p. 37).

This important collection takes us beyond earlier hagiographic accounts of the development of mobile communications in Japan such as Matsunaga's (2001) *Birth of i-Mode* and Beck and Wade's (2002) *DoCoMo: Japan's Wireless Tsunami* which focus more on business models, policy developments, and technical and management issues. Ito et al.'s collection is significant for scholarship into mobile media in the Asia-Pacific in two ways: the contributors challenge the model that sees the United States as 'the supposed vanguard of the information society' (Ito, 2005, p. 3) while simultaneously dislocating the hegemony of Anglophone media theory by drawing upon extensive Japanese-language scholarship. The editors set up the intellectual project of the volume by stressing the need to understand how cultural and social factors impact not just upon the take-up of a technology but also on its functions and design.

Ito points out that technologies are not universal; rather, it is necessary to attend to 'the heterogeneous co-constitution of technology across a transnational stage' (Ito, 2005, p. 7) and the contributors to the volume do a good job in outlining how Japanese society comprises very different 'technoscapes' that differ markedly from US and European locations. In Japan (and to an extent in other Asian societies), unlike the Internet, mobile telephony was not 'conceived by an elite and noncommercial technological priesthood and disseminated to the masses' (Ito, 2005, p. 9) but emerged out of Japanese consumers' love of 'gadget fetishism and technofashion' and the market was driven, not by a business elite, but grew out of the existing pager culture of Japanese teenage girls. This collection emphasizes the fact that although the Japanese *keitai* supports functions associated with land-line telephones, it cannot be understood solely through models that assume the primacy of voice contact. Matsuda notes how the *keitai* is a 'technofashion gadget' (Matsuda, 2005, p. 20) driven by young consumers, especially young women.

In this respect, the Japanese *keitai* has much in common with mobile phones in Korea and China where the design of the phones themselves, as well as the manner in which they are accessorized (via downloads, ringtones, wallpaper, as well as cases, handles, straps and other add-ons) has become an important signifier of fashionable status and identity

(Castells et al., 2005, p. 50). Although there are differences: in Japan and Korea, the ‘customization’ of the phone itself is more likely to take the form (among women in particular) of ‘cute’ downloads and add-ons such as animated and plastic cartoon characters (Hjorth, 2005). In China, where the technology is less ubiquitous and therefore more a signifier of status, ornaments are likely to feature real precious metal and gem stones. However, as Katz and Sugiyama (2005) point out, the use of gem stones is, in the Chinese context, not simply reducible to ostentation but needs to be considered in a cultural context where certain stones symbolize ‘esteem, good fortune, peace and love’—as indeed do the phone numbers themselves which are chosen on account of their auspicious sound or combination.

Other kinds of customization are popular, too, elsewhere in Asia. Bell, for instance, notes the penchant for painted handsets popular among Malaysian youth. She mentions her bewilderment at the choices on offer in a local mall: designs featuring the face of Osama bin Laden and a plane crashing into the World Trade Center, hanging next to Hello Kitty and characters from Disney. As she notes, cell phones and their decorations clearly ‘function as a kind of extended body politic’ (Bell, 2005, p. 81).

The need to pay close attention to the local contexts of use is further emphasized by Bell in her chapter on ‘mobile technologies from Asia’ in Glotz et al.’s (2005) *Thumb Culture: The Meaning of Mobile Phones for Society* (a title that would make more sense if ‘culture’, ‘meaning’ and ‘society’ were in the plural). Bell quite rightly draws attention to the ‘cultures of mobility in Asia’ (at last the plural) when she suggests that ‘what it means to be “mobile”...has distinct cultural meanings’ (Bell, 2005, p. 70). Bell is also correct in stressing that the real impetus behind mobile communications development and uptake is Asia, and not the US, which ‘in many ways...is more the anomaly than the rule’ (Bell, 2005, p. 70). Bell’s chapter results from a larger pan-Asian research project and it is to be hoped that the results can be brought together in a monograph.

Although the majority of research into mobile communications in Asia focuses upon Japan, Korea and China, there is some excellent work being done on the Philippines and



the chapters on that nation are among the best in Ling and Pedersen's (2005) *Mobile Communications*, Kim's (2005) *When Mobile Came* and the 2005 Proceedings of the *International Conference on Mobile Communication and Asian Modernities*. Goggin (2006), too, in *Cell Phone Culture*, is clearly intrigued by the dynamic uptake of mobile communications (particularly messaging) in the Philippines and his detailed analysis of Philippine usage (as well as his critique of the sometimes utopian tone of existing research) is a welcome addition to a discussion which otherwise tends to draw its examples of non-western trajectories from the more 'advanced' region of North-East Asia.

Despite the economic challenges faced by a majority of the population, the mobile phone has become, according to Pertierra (2005, p. 157), 'the most successful technology to be introduced to the Philippines'. In less than a decade cell phones have massively outstripped the number of landlines (30 million cell phones to 7 million landlines), reaching a penetration rate of nearly 35%. While the mobile uptake was originally driven by the middle-class business market, providers have targeted the lower end of the economic spectrum by offering free or inexpensive texting and prepay phone cards, allowing those with no credit history or fixed abode to access the technology (Castells et al., 2004, p. 124).

In the Philippine context, the implications of this sudden access to a technology previously reserved for elites can be described as revolutionary. Goggin (2006, p. 77-80), for instance, emphasises the degree of agency afforded by mobile telephony to otherwise disenfranchised individuals who used instant messaging to disseminate anti-government and anti-authoritarian information, parodies and jokes. The cumulative effect of this e-protest was the 'coup de text' that overthrew the corrupt President Estrada in 2001. While instant messaging was, of course, crucial in organizing the massive street demonstrations that eventually led to the president's resignation, these demonstrations could not have come about except through the establishment of a culture of parody and dissent that had already been established via the mass circulation of anti-Estrada text messages.

Importantly, research being developed by Yu (2006) also emphasizes the significance of instant messaging in a society like China, whose media is under strict state control. Information about the SARS epidemic, for instance, which the government tried to suppress, was widely distributed via text messages. Furthermore, the government's increasingly absurd denials of the seriousness of the health scare led to the circulation of messages of a parodic and darkly humorous nature, thus further undermining any respect that the populace had for its leaders. The impact of mobile communications on generating and supporting a culture of resistance to corrupt and authoritarian states in the region is clearly a topic needing further investigation.

Another key research topic should be the way in which mobile communications enhance the ability of diasporic populations to keep in contact with those left behind in the homeland. As Bell argues, mobile communications in the Asia-Pacific region (and beyond) are crucial in 're-charting social relationships fractured by colonial and post-colonial geographic separations' (Bell, 2005, p. 69). The importance of mobile communications to Filipinos/as, for instance, is not limited to the borders of that nation, but has implications for the wider region, given the Philippine's large population of migrant workers. Pertierra observes how migrant workers had previously experienced difficulty making telephone contact with family and friends remaining at home (Pertierra, 2005, p. 160; *see also* Paragas 2005a, p. 189), a point also emphasized by Thomson (2005) who offers a detailed case study of the mobile options available to migrant workers in Singapore. Thus, while in richer countries of Asia, mobile telephony is often a complement to other kinds of fixed-line and broadband communication, For Filipinos/as at home and abroad, it is an important substitute (Paragas 2005b, p. 118).

However, although Pertierra notes that communication via mobile phones (especially texting) is convenient because of its easy access and relative cheapness, he suggests that the true appeal of the technology in the Philippines (and in Asia more widely) lies in the mobile phone's 'capacity to provide private and un surveilled communication' (Pertierra, 2005, p. 157) away from the prying eyes of kinship networks, many members of which share the same limited living space. In this constraining environment, texting clearly

offers a level of privacy impossible for vocal communication. Bearing this in mind, I sometimes give my students a quick quiz on mobile communications throughout the world and one question concerns which nationality sends the most SMS messages. No-one ever gets it right: it is in fact the Philippines with an average of 8 messages per user per day. (This exceeds even Japan, another nation where text messages exceed voice calls, especially among young people [Okada, 2005, p. 49].)

Pertierra argues that young people (particularly women) are often particularly constrained in their behavior – both while in the home and under parental surveillance and in public where they are subject to stricter rules of decorum than those faced by men. This includes behaviour whilst on the telephone (especially in public spaces) which Paragas notes ‘is a riddle in decorum that seems to be more confounding than in the west’ (Paragas, 2005, p. 119). As a consequence of this lack of private space, it is difficult for young people to negotiate erotic relationships and so texting has been taken up for this purpose, enabling ‘the exploration and development of sexual agency’ (Pertierra, 2005, p. 169).

Intriguingly, Angel Lin (2005) makes a similar observation regarding the deployment of SMS messages by migrant workers in Southern China who use their phones’ messaging service ‘for purposes of dating and courtship’. However, in the Chinese case, the use of SMS for this purpose is not connected to lack of personal space so much as it is to Chinese conventions of courtship which involve the exchange of romantic epithets and proverbs which can be selected and downloaded from a fixed repertoire (particularly attractive to migrant workers with limited education and cultural capital). As Bell notes, the condensed, character-based nature of the Chinese script, which is more space efficient than the alphabet, offers ‘a far richer messaging experience’ (Bell, 2005, p. 68) since it enables more complex content to be displayed on a small screen.

The particularities of space in the Philippine context are also taken up by Paragas who notes how mobile phone use on public transport is constrained by numerous factors, not least issues to do with personal safety. In the metro Philippines where a range of public transport is available across a broad price range (which determines the type of clientele

that uses it), Paragas argues that ‘modes of transport bear strongly upon mobile telephony’ (Paragas, 2005b, p. 123). In the more expensive, air-conditioned transport options where commuters are insulated from the noise and bustle of the street, etiquette demands that spoken conversations via the mobile phone are kept short and quiet and that discussions of a personal nature be avoided. In cheaper, more crowded (and less uptight) travel environments, however, the audacious display of a new model of phone can draw attention and mark the owner out as a target for petty theft, leading to ‘the fear the gadget may invite harm’ (Paragas, 2005b, p. 122). Thus, in certain environments in the Philippines, Paragas notes how the commonsense notion that mobile phone ownership offers the owner a ‘security blanket’ is turned on its head as phone owners are afraid to take out and use the devices lest the phone becomes ‘a threat to one’s security in public transport’ (Paragas, 2005b, p. 127). Here is a clear instance of how mobile phone use is variously negotiated in a variety of spaces on a daily basis. This discussion of space and the cultural expectations conditioning behaviour (according to age, gender, social class etc.) is a useful heuristic to get students thinking about their own deployment of mobile communications technologies as they navigate their way through public and private spaces in the (sub)urban landscape.

An interesting point of contrast regarding public transport and the mobile phone is offered by Japan where spoken communication via these devices on buses and trains is frowned upon and needs to be handled with particular decorum. As Matsuda (2005, p. 24) points out ‘The physical noise is not the problem. Rather, *keitai* conversations disrupt the order of urban space’ through confusing the boundaries of private and public. Okabe and Ito (2005) point out how from 1996, when young people became the main demographic to take up the mobile phone, there developed a voluble media discourse about their use in public settings. (Indeed, in Japanese switching one’s phone to vibrate/silent is referred to as ‘manner mode’.) Unlike the more chaotic nature of the cheaper forms of public transport in the Philippines, public transport in Japan is ‘characterized by precise technical and social regulation and very low rates of disorder’ (Okabe and Ito, 2005, p. 208) supported by commuters’ willing acquiescence to a system of ‘mutual surveillance, regulation and sanctioning’ (Okabe and Ito, 2005, p. 208). (It

must, however, be noted that ‘Japan’ is not uniform in this respect and that commuters in the Osaka area are more forgiving of *keitai* use by commuters than those in Tokyo.)

As Castells et al. (2004) point out, mobile communications clearly impact upon and themselves help to redefine notions of time and place. That communication via mobile devices itself creates a new kind of virtual environment is clear from many case studies and, as Castells et al. also point out, it has often been young people who have pioneered and shaped these environments. The importance of understanding the particular developmental trajectories of new media is highlighted by another Japanese case—the popularity in the mid to late 90s of paging devices among high-school girls (a mobile communications phase absent in the youth cultures of Australia, Europe and the US). Okada (2005) notes how in the mid-90s schoolgirls in Japan appropriated paging devices originally developed for the (male) business market, using the keypad on telephones to send simple text messages to the LCD displays of friends’ pagers. This led to a distinct *poke-kotoba* (pager-lingo) among the subculture and assisted young people in organizing their private lives outside of parental supervision and control. The prior popularity of pagers among youth groups impacted upon the functions of early models of mobile phones which included SMS services and from 1999, via a service known as *i-mode*, Internet enabled e-mail (Kohiyama, 2005). In Japan, these were innovations driven by and for the youth market.

The above examples bear witness to the four general trends apparent in mobile communications uptake outlined by Castells et al. That many markets in the region are youth-driven is clearly apparent (and of particular interest is the extent to which young women have been attracted to mobile technologies). Language change, too, which has always been influenced by youth subcultures, is also clearly being driven by this youth uptake. The political ramifications of the kind of mass networking enabled by instant messaging is also clearly demonstrated in the case of the popular revolt against corruption in the Philippines, but there are other less apparent (for the moment) changes taking place among the new Chinese middleclass whose irreverent attitude toward their ineffectual local and national leaders is increasingly expressed via instant messaging.

That people's consciousness of time and space is also being affected by new developments in mobile communications is also clear from small-scale local differences in the use of mobile devices in public spaces (especially on public transport) to wider patterns of adoption among mobile, diasporic populations.

Although, as the texts discussed above illustrate, we now have many interesting and useful individual articles investigating these different dimensions of mobile communications and their impacts, the field still lacks a general overview that attempts to understand these patterns and trends in a regional framework, especially one that does not fall back upon default references to a standardized or normalized pattern of usage in 'the west' (almost always understood to be the US or Europe, never Australia, the particularity of whose mobile uptake remains largely unexamined). Such a review is necessary to help encourage students (and some professional researchers) to think of mobile communications (or indeed any technology) as part of complex socio-cultural systems that are tied into local regional as well as global flows of people, technology and desire.

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