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Internet Domains between China and India: Beyond Anglophone Paradigms

Mark McLelland

Introduction

The workshop on 'Internet domains between China and India'¹ hosted by Melbourne University's Asia Institute in 2006 is one of a range of innovative Internet studies projects to have taken place in Australia recently that have taken as their focus Internet cultures outside the West. Mention might also be made of the University of Wollongong's two-day workshop on 'Understanding the Internet in the Asia-Pacific'² and the workshop 'Internationalizing Internet Studies' hosted by Queensland University of Technology,³ both also held in 2006. Having attended all three events, it was exciting to experience first-hand the way in which a dialogue is emerging among researchers working on new media in an Asian context. Put simply, there is a growing attempt by researchers with Asian-language expertise to move beyond the Anglophone methodologies and paradigms that have so far structured the disciplines of Internet and Web studies.

As the proposal for the Asia Institute's initiative makes clear, 'millions of people in Asian societies view the Internet through a different linguistic and cultural lens than that established by Bill Gates'.⁴ Yet, despite the fact that more than a decade into Internet studies there is now a substantial body of work covering many aspects of online communication, the large majority of this has been written in English and has taken as its object of inquiry Internet communication in English. In the literature generally, the United States is all too often taken as 'the supposed vanguard of the information society' (Ito, 2005: 3) and until recently there has been little attempt to generate a discussion among scholars working on different language cultures or to develop modes of analysis that do not take Anglophone models as their starting point (Matsuda 2002; Nishimura 2003). Ito, for instance, complains about the western-centric approach of most Anglophone researchers, noting that although Japanese researchers are well acquainted with Anglophone social science theory, 'the reverse flow is relatively

rare' (2005: 4) and as a consequence studies of 'the Internet' that rely solely upon Anglophone theory run the risk of being parochial at best.

Given the virtual monopoly that English enjoyed online in the early 90s, this bias was perhaps inevitable. However, from the mid-1990s onwards, the Internet has shifted fundamentally from its co-ordinates in English-speaking countries, especially North America, to become an essential medium in a wide range of countries, cultures, and languages. According to March 2006 statistics,⁵ Chinese language now represents 14.1% of all Internet communication and media use, Japanese 9.6 % and Spanish 9%. At 35.8% and falling, English use is now a minority in terms of overall online language use. However, communications and media scholarship, especially in the Anglophone world, has not registered the deep ramifications of this shift and the challenges it poses to the concepts, methods, assumptions, and frameworks used to study the Internet. Despite the fact that there is also a large body of work being produced by scholars in non-English-speaking cultures and locales, hardly any of this work is being translated and it has had little impact on theorization of the developing fields of Internet and Web studies. Hence, it was exciting to be part of a series of events featuring researchers from various societies in the region as well as Australia-based researchers working in Asian languages and the series of publications (such as this edited edition) arising from these various events is to be welcomed.

These publications are to be welcomed not simply from the point of view of a researcher but also from a classroom perspective. As new media gain in cultural and social significance, a range of subjects in cultural studies, media and communication studies, sociology, journalism, commerce and marketing are being rewritten to acknowledge the recent shift to a convergent digital media environment. Many Australian universities have high numbers of overseas students (primarily from East Asia) taking these subjects and many universities, including the University of Wollongong, run offshore programs in Asia. As a researcher into Asian media who also teaches in an offshore communication studies program in Hong Kong, it has been difficult to find useful contemporary material dealing with Asian societies that can be set for classroom discussion.

Teaching new media subjects both in Hong Kong and in Wollongong, it is apparent that students in these different locales have very different experiences of the online environment and it is the Australian students who have a less rich and less sophisticated engagement with a range of new media, including the Internet. Several of the papers in this collection illustrate very nicely the dense daily engagement that young people have with the Internet in China and Korea for example, and are well suited to classroom discussions that engage with the differences in online environments in a range of societies in the region. One of the primary differences between the Australian and the East Asian Internet experience is the extent to which the latter is often mediated by mobile devices.

Mobile Internet Uptake in Japan and East Asia

There are a range of reasons why otherwise highly developed societies such as Japan and Korea came relatively late to the Internet age, among them the necessity of developing programming codes and transmission protocols that could deal with complex character-based scripts. Closely aligned with these encoding difficulties is the fact that neither of these societies had gone through the same kind of office automation characteristic of Western societies. Although in the Western context the movement from manual typewriter to electric typewriter to personal computer was fairly seamless – given that the QWERTY keyboard remained the main human-machine interface on all these devices -- this kind of office automation and computerisation presented a challenge to users of non-alphabet based Asian languages. It is no surprise that in Japan and elsewhere in East Asia, the PC has not emerged as the main interface through which consumers access the Internet, but rather a range of hand-held and mobile devices have proven more popular. The different orthographies of languages in the region necessarily impacted upon the take-up of computerisation in general and the Internet in particular, and led to different developmental trajectories and patterns of use that diverge in many important ways from those characteristic of Australia or the US.

The example of Japan is a case in point. 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’ (2004: 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' (2004: 103).

The importance of understanding the particular developmental trajectories of the mobile Internet is highlighted by a Japanese case—the popularity in the mid-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 which enabled subscribers to write longer messages and also include graphics, audio, video and web links (Matsuda 2005: 35). In Japan, these were innovations driven by and for the youth market. Indeed, mobile uptake among young people is evident across East Asia and has resulted in a 'juvenation' of the technology (i.e. a movement away from a business model of mobile telecommunications toward a model that focuses on young people's recreational patterns of use – SMS, gaming, ring tones, downloads, etc.).

While not 'unique' to Japan (since Japanese patterns of usage are similar in some respects to South Korea), 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 Japan (and to an extent in other East Asian societies), unlike the Internet, mobile telephony was not 'conceived by an elite and noncommercial technological priesthood and disseminated to the masses' (2005: 9) but emerged out of young Japanese consumers' love of 'gadget fetishism and technofashion'.

The astonishing uptake of the mobile Internet in Japan, from only one-million *i-mode* subscribers in 1999 to over 46 million in 2006 is also related to a host of other specific factors, not least the problematic blurring of public and private space occasioned by the advent of the mobile phone. In Japan spoken communication via mobiles that takes place 'in public' on

buses and trains is frowned upon and needs to be handled with particular decorum. As Matsuda (2005: 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'.) Public transport in Japan is 'characterized by precise technical and social regulation and very low rates of disorder' (2005: 208) supported by commuters' willing acquiescence to a system of 'mutual surveillance, regulation and sanctioning' (2005: 208). Consequently, on the whole, answering the phone or making a call while on public transport is to be avoided.

One way around this impasse is of course the use of SMS and email which can be actioned with limited disturbance to those around. However, Internet-enabled mobile phones are deployed in many other ways by commuters on their long trips to and from their place of work. As in South Korea, the almost ubiquitous provision of wireless access to fast broadband networks makes the receipt and transmission of information quick and efficient. Innovative payment systems where the user pays per packet downloaded to the phone and receives each month an itemised bill for this service, also encourage commuters to surf the Internet via their *keitai* screens – updating their websites, engaging in chat, looking up news and sports, TV and show schedules, or even finding a specific kind of restaurant via the phone's satellite navigation function. Unsurprisingly, as Markoff and Fackler (2006) point out, 'Japanese phones do not work on European mobile networks' – they are too sophisticated.

In sum, the Japanese enjoy an extremely rich and sophisticated mobile Internet experience not paralleled elsewhere (except South Korea) and one which is quite distinct from the PC-based online experience of most people hailing from Western societies.

The Internet in Everyday Life

As noted in the Introduction to this paper, having taught communications studies subjects both in Australia and Hong Kong, it is readily apparent that Hong Kong students have a much richer and denser engagement with new media, particularly the Internet, than do Australian

students. For a range of reasons, not least to do with geography and density of population, Hong Kong residents have access to faster and cheaper broadband than do Australian residents and they are as likely to access the Internet through a range of mobile devices as they are through their PCs. Most Hong Kong students I have encountered live in a '24/7' Internet environment and are more deeply invested in their online activities than are Australian students. What Hong Kong students arriving on our shores think about the digital environment in Australia is yet to be researched.

However, in her paper in this collection Larissa Hjorth has surveyed Korean students studying in Melbourne to uncover the kind of online lives they enjoyed in Korea and to find out what happens when these students arrive in a less well connected Internet environment. Like its neighbour Japan, South Korea is a techno savvy society that displays extremely high rates of broadband connectivity. While the development of a high-speed optical cable Internet service has been stalled in Australia due to disputes between government and industry providers, South Korea is reported as having the best e-government in the world. Proactive government initiatives, alongside convenient demographics (three-quarters of the population live in seven major cities in high-rise developments equipped with high-speed Internet), has resulted in South Korea becoming a world leader in high-speed Internet accessibility, ahead of the US, Canada and Japan (Yoo, in press).

Hjorth's survey of Korean students reveals a dense and sophisticated engagement with online communication that both reinforces and augments offline connections. She focuses her analysis upon one site in particular, Cyworld, a provider of mini-homepages (known as *minihompy*), to one-third of the South Korean population. Hjorth notes how users' *minihompy* pages are constantly updated with blogs, photos and messages (including those posted by friends) so that the pages give a snapshot of what the user is up to that day or even that hour or moment. It is not a fantasy space for identity play or subversion, as Hjorth notes, 'Cyworld does not aim to substitute the virtual for the actual but rather to use technological space to further connect individuals with the real world'. It is a kind of 'third space' between home and work and the way in which users interact in this space mirrors offline relations. As Hjorth points out, the Korean notion of *chon* or degrees of kinship is reflected in how far another user can get into your profile, many 'rooms' in your *minihompy* being restricted to those who are friends (*ilchon*, literally one remove). Thus, to be granted *ilchon* status and to be

allowed to move freely around a friend's or relative's minihompy is a sign of 'co-presence' and 'establishes a correspondence between online and offline identities'. It is a way of maintaining intimacy and a sense of connectedness despite geographical separation.

Given the above, the minihompy would seem to be an ideal means for Korean students studying in Australia to maintain contact with their friends and family at home. However, as Hjorth points out, it does not work out that way since 'almost 90% of respondents [expressed frustration with] the lack of speedy and efficient broadband and lack of wireless services taken for granted in their homeland'. Hjorth's investigation reveals that the poor quality of Australia's Internet service has made it difficult to update the minihompys and as a result Korean students tend to revert to previous technologies such as email and voice calling to keep in touch with folks at home. As Hjorth points out 'One of the marked features of the Internet is that as a "global" technology its adaptation at the level of the local is far from homogenous', and as her case study shows, it is not the case that local Internet cultures can simply be reproduced anywhere in the world.

While Hjorth's paper is an interesting case study of how online communication can provide intimate virtual 'co-presence' among communities of people already known to each other, Anne McLaren offers a contrasting study of a different kind of intimate online environment, this time one populated by people without any offline history of connectivity. McLaren looks at a popular online game in China where players can set up virtual homes and play at being married, even to the extent of raising children and pets, and divorcing when the relationship turns sour. Despite the fact that there has been much negative publicity about such games in the press and they are frowned on by officials, McLaren suggests that such sites should be seen as part of China's opening up to market forces, and their existence is 'part of a new legal phenomenon whereby anything not actually proscribed by law is regarded as allowable'.

McLaren understands the popularity of such games with young people as deriving from the specific cultural environment surrounding sex and marriage in mainland China. Access to pornographic websites and to information about sexuality is highly restricted and young people are not as free as those in neighbouring societies to establish cohabiting relationships. Marriage itself is often delayed since one must first graduate from college, secure a job and save money. Hence, a virtual environment offers the opportunity to engage in risqué dialogue

and work through relationship issues without consequence of social opprobrium; although as McLaren notes, communication is tame by Western standards and 'sexy language' is more likely to be 'expressed in the languid language of romance'. 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'. Lin notes how Chinese conventions of courtship involve the exchange of romantic epithets and proverbs which can be selected and downloaded from a fixed repertoire (particularly convenient for those with limited education).

Haiqing Yu also looks at popular Chinese websites but analyses those more oriented toward social commentary than toward the interior realm of friendship and intimacy. Yu notes how in recent years blogging has been taken up enthusiastically by a wide range of people in China, including some 14.2% of all China's Internet users, and that it is used as a 'new venue for individuals to exercise citizenship, not through overt resistance, but through a process of resubjectification via mediated expression, social interaction, and circulation of their own media stories'. Yu believes that an analysis of China's blogging culture is a useful introduction to 'the cultural politics of everyday China'. In blogging, Yu sees a convergence of 'commodity culture (manifested as consumption) and knowledge culture (manifested as media production)' and notes how many blogs are augmented with audio and video footage. She notes how many blogs have a playful tone and represent a kind of 'entertainment for entertainment purpose' which conflicts with the orthodox party position of 'education through entertainment'. Part of this playfulness is a 'deliberate misuse and misinterpretation of mainstream ideology' which manages to be subversive without directly challenging or opposing orthodox positions and as such she sees the development of the blog as one more example of 'a tactical use of language [that] has characterized the various forms of popular resistance in contemporary China'. What is so pleasurable for bloggers, she suggests, is the potential that the medium offers for 'moments of tactical and light-hearted resistance'. Although western journalists commonly regard these bloggers as engaged in an adversarial relationship with state authorities, Yu suggests that the bloggers themselves do not regard their activities in such black and white terms. Chinese bloggers nuanced and 'tactical' use of the Internet is also discernable among online communities with more direct political interests.

The Internet and the Public Sphere

Discussion so far has focussed on the three papers that explore more personal, idiosyncratic ways in which users engage with the Internet in order to affirm existing relationships, explore new relationships and develop ironic and humorous online personas. Although Yu's paper deals to some extent with the expression of dissent online, she is careful to point out that most bloggers are not out for 'momentary stardom or martyrdom'. However, as the three remaining papers in this collection describe, there are considerable limitations on freedom of expression in the virtual realm in China, just as there are in offline life, and online communication needs to be conducted with decorum.

Jonathan Benney's paper looks at the role of the Internet in popularising an emergent concept in China, that of *weiquan* or 'rights defence'. However, *weiquan* should not be collapsed into abstract Western notions of 'human rights' since it has a quite different history and nuance in the Chinese context. As Benney points out, 'rights defence' refers to an emergent movement that seeks to defend individuals' rights as they are defined in law against encroachment or disregard by 'local government and statutory bodies' and includes such things as resistance to unreasonable taxes, charges for services and the recognition of property rights of landholders.

Like Yu, Benney investigates the recent 'blog explosion' in China and regards this medium as particularly effective for the expression of opposition and dissent. In particular, it allows aggrieved parties to make their complaints public and to track the progress of their case through the courts, thus opening up the process to greater public scrutiny. The interactive features of the Internet are also crucial in garnering support for wronged parties via BBS which are used to leave comments and conduct a discussion about the case (as well as linking to past and present cases of interest). Indeed, important characteristics of new media such as interactivity and convergence have promoted what Benney terms 'rights defence networks' that would have been difficult to establish via traditional media. Particularly important is the transnational reach of these networks and the facts that via blog technology, local residents in China can both inform and receive advice from Chinese abroad. To this extent, the *weiquan* sites discussed by Benney support Yang's (2003) contention that the Chinese Internet constitutes a 'transnational public sphere'.

Religious expression can be a particularly fraught issue both on- and offline in China. Indeed when I was looking into getting a visa for China a year ago I was surprised to find a banner warning about ‘the evil cult Falun Gong’ on the embassy’s main page (subsequently relegated to a separate ‘topics’ page)⁶. Emily Dunn’s paper in this collection is one of the first to explore the significance of the Internet for religions in China. Dunn investigates several new religions, or ‘cyber sects’ that have established an online presence in the last few years, including Eastern Lightning, a syncretistic Christian sect that teaches that Christ has returned to Earth in the body of a Chinese woman. A cause of consternation both to established Christian sects (from which Eastern Lightning poaches followers) and to the government, which has branded it an ‘evil cult’, Eastern Lightning increasingly relies upon the Internet to spread its message. Unlike established religions which have millennia of doctrinal developments behind them, syncretistic new religions develop new dogmas at a rapid rate, and Dunn notes how the Internet, which enables the frequent updating (but also deleting) of content, is particularly suited to sects going through doctrinal flux. As she points out, the ephemeral nature of Internet sources enables church officials ‘to “vanish” old religious discourses as they are superceded.’

Eastern Lightning’s status as a proscribed ‘evil cult’ which is denounced equally by mainstream Christians as well as government ideologues has had a major impact on the form that its online presence takes. The site contains texts for the purpose for proselytising only, but has no interactive features and does not provide information about congregations, meeting places, or offer any means to establish or strengthen community. Yet, as Dunn points out, this is probably no great loss since the main constituency for the sects’ teachings are the disenfranchised poor in rural areas of northern China and these people are not computer literate anyway. (In 2006, the penetration rate of the Internet in rural regions of China was just 3 percent). Thus, Eastern Lightning’s website, as Dunn concludes, is largely of ‘symbolic value’, establishing it on the world stage and thus bringing in largely symbolic capital.

Internet use by officially recognised Christian sects, particularly the Catholic church, is investigated by the final paper in this collection by Jeremy Clarke. In contrast to the lack of interactive features present on Eastern Lightning’s website, Clarke notes how the three main official Catholic portals on the Chinese Internet ‘seek to welcome people to the Catholic community, educate them about what it is to be a Catholic and help them in their interactions

with their families, their local communities and their broader world'. The main purpose of these websites, as Clarke sees it, is 'creating communion, both virtual and physical'. Given that Catholicism is a world church community, with its headquarters in the Vatican, the priests and lay staff who run the websites are keen to make reference to Catholic figures and teachings throughout the world, including the Pope and his proclamations, and to engender a sense of global communion. However, given the fact that the Vatican does not recognise the communist government of the PRC, the sites administrators do not have a completely free hand when it comes to reporting on church news and doctrine. Yet, rather than outspokenly defying government regulations, Clarke suggests that the Catholic websites are engaged in a complex relationship of 'entanglement' with both PRC and Vatican authorities. The administrators are pragmatic and recognise that 'they are indeed under the gaze of numerous authorities, and post information accordingly'.

Clearly the Internet experience of individuals living in Japan, Korea and China is very different and it would be impossible to talk about a singular 'Asian' online environment. What did emerge out of the series of discussions among Internet researchers working on Asian societies was not so much a sense of common issues, but rather a common understanding that 'the Internet', which is so often positioned as a 'global' and 'deterritorialised' technology, should, in fact, be understood in relation to different cultures of use which are still very much influenced by geographical location. As Ito points out, technologies are not universal; rather, it is necessary to attend to 'the heterogeneous co-constitution of technology across a transnational stage' (2005: 7). The papers in this collection do much to advance this agenda.

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Notes

¹ <http://www.asiainstitute.unimelb.edu.au/community/symposia.html> (accessed 16 April 2007)

² <http://www.capstrans.edu.au/resources/conferences/2006/conferences-2006-understand-inet.html> (accessed 16 April 2007)

³ <http://www.capstrans.edu.au/resources/conferences/2006/conferences-2006-inet-studies.html> (accessed 16 April 2007).

⁴ http://www.sueztoosuva.org.au/e2005/symposium_china_india.pdf (accessed 17 April 2007)

⁵ <http://global-reach.biz/globstats/index.php3> (accessed 27 March 2006).

⁶ See <http://au.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/jpflg/default.htm> (accessed 17 April 2007). At time of writing there were 55 separate articles 'exposing' Falun Gong, including one, authored by 'a scientist' claiming that Falun Gong is 'a complete superstition', and 'a new horror, a most serious harm to people's political and spiritual rights and a profanity of human civilization', at: <http://au.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/jpflg/t46125.htm> (accessed 17 April 2007).