

New Media & Society

<http://nms.sagepub.com>

Editorial: mobile communication and Asian modernities

Jack Linchuan Qiu and Eric C. Thompson

New Media Society 2007; 9; 895

DOI: 10.1177/1461444807082637

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://nms.sagepub.com>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *New Media & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>



Editorial: mobile communication and Asian modernities

Editors:

JACK LINCHUAN QIU

Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

ERIC C. THOMPSON

National University of Singapore, Singapore

The global emergence of mobile phone and wireless services has renewed the call for new media researchers to understand better the relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs) and society. This is an intellectual challenge comparable to the one posed by the rise of the internet a decade ago. In this themed section of *New Media & Society*, we propose to take on the challenge and explore the opportunities therein by examining the social, cultural and institutional dynamics of wireless ICTs and the formation of multiple modernities in the context of contemporary Asia.

We choose to focus on this part of the world because Asia has long been portrayed as an exotic Other outside western modernity. However, since the post-war industrialization of Japan and the 'tiger' economies and the recent economic and technological boom in China, India and several Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, the region has become a major global ICT powerhouse, especially with regard to aspects of mobile communication. In the wake of the Asian Financial crisis of the late 1990s, we have observed a surprising leap in the diffusion of mobile phones throughout Asia, now home to more users than Europe or North America (International Telecommunications Union, 2005). Parallel to rapid technological diffusion is the impressive production capacity of Asia as the world's leading manufacturer of mobile handsets and accessories. While European and American brands remain prominent in Asian markets, indigenous capacity has been connected to transnational capital and global networks of production and distribution,

thus giving rise to new dynamics and players. For example, BYD, a company in south China, has more than half of the global market share for mobile phone batteries (Fishman, 2006).

The complex social dynamics of Asia and the rapid technological diffusion of mobile phones create an intriguing conjuncture that we hope to highlight in this themed section. As Ito et al. (2005) rightly point out in their study on Japan, because mobile communication is 'personal, portable, pedestrian', it is more likely to be influenced by local uses and the surrounding contexts as opposed to the personal computer (PC)-based immersive technology experience typically documented in the West. Extending this argument from Japan to the region, we can see that Asia offers excellent cases for the exploration of something that one may call 'mobile modernities', i.e. a particular set of technological, social and cultural realities that are supplementary and antithetical to the singularly conceptualized 'internet modernity'.

This is by no means the first time that we face the thorny question about the plurality of modernity and modernization paths in the Asian context. The decade-old debate, on 'Asian values' and 'Confucian modernity', stimulated by politicians such as Lee Kuan Yew, is but one such instance of this argument (de Bary, 1998). What we hope to do in the following is not to engage in any politicized debate, but to draw concrete lessons from the actual ways by which mobile technologies are adopted, appropriated and apprehended in Asia. In so doing, we do not presume a coherent system that characterizes the wide array of empirical developments as a whole. Rather, we take it as our point of departure that there are many paths toward mobile modernities in Asia. These paths may lead to different destinations as opposed to Euro-American experiences and among the various Asian countries themselves. Or they may reveal similar patterns of modernization, both inside the region and in comparison with the rest of the developing world.

But which Asia? Into which people, what mobile services and what specific social, institutional and cultural phenomena should we look? The articles in this themed section refuse to give a simplified answer. Instead, they offer a broad scope of analysis, focusing on China, Malaysia and related transnational processes throughout the region as well as globally, in an attempt to reveal a plurality of Asian mobile modernities. The articles use different concepts and methods while drawing on a variety of social scientific and humanistic disciplines ranging from communication studies to political science, from hermeneutics to telecommunications policy.

Before closer examination of the issues addressed in this themed section, a panoramic overview of Asian mobile modernities is in order. The most obvious dimension differentiating mobile communications experience among different countries is the timing and extent of technological diffusion, largely associated with economic wealth and development. At one end, there are the most 'modern', advanced, industrialized or even post-industrial societies such

as Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, where mobile penetration has reached saturation in an economy which has been transformed decisively by ICTs. At the opposite extreme, one can find societies such as Myanmar, Nepal and North Korea, where the diffusion of mobile communication technology is relatively limited and to date mobiles play a rather limited role in shaping social processes and economic structures. But even in these countries, mobile communications technology is having an impact. It is telling, for example, that the King Gyanendra of Nepal repeatedly shut down mobile phone networks to prevent political protests during 2005 and 2006. Mobile phones are becoming increasingly popular in places such as Myanmar, despite its relative political and economic isolation from the dominant streams of globalization. Moreover, mobile phones have become an everyday item in countries such as Lao PDR, despite having one of the lowest per capita income levels in Asia.

Equally interesting are the countries located somewhere between the two poles of economic wealth and industrial development. These are the majority of cases with a significant, although varying, degree of liberalization in the telecom industry, which has contributed to phenomenal mobile growth in recent years. However, the specific vectors of technological deployment are quite different, with a variety of goals, both social and commercial. One is the usage of mobiles, usually with an emphasis on the grassroots level, for such purposes as poverty alleviation, the empowerment of disadvantaged people and capacity-building among civil society organizations. Examples of this prototype are perhaps most prominent in Bangladesh, where GrameenPhone brings mobile communication to rural villages. Another pioneer is the Philippines, with its low-end mobile banking services and mobile-facilitated political activism, both of which rely on inexpensive short messaging services (SMS) or 'texting' (Donner, 2007; Pertierra et al., 2002). Similar developments also exist in India, which enjoys a long tradition of ICTs for development (ICT4D) and is a centre of global information technology (IT) growth in recent years.

Finally, there are countries such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, whose most predominant characteristic is the blending of a market-driven, commercially-oriented mobile phone boom on the one hand, and the persistence of traditional systems such as communism or Islam on the other, both wary of freewheeling markets in their own ways. Despite internal tensions, these societies adopt mobile phones primarily as a commodity for consumption within pre-existing political and institutional parameters. More often than not, the diffusion of mobiles is an integral part of the industrialization process of national economies whose scope is no longer limited to the domestic market, but increasingly linked with processes of economic globalization, thus giving rise to a most intriguing symbiosis between the local, national and transnational. Moreover, the mobile phone as

an icon of modernity and globalization frequently becomes entangled with the most 'traditional' and local beliefs. A fascinating case in point is the cultural imaginaries that connect mobile communication with ghosts and supernatural power, as identified by Barendregt (2005) in Indonesia. 'The ghost in the phone' has become a special genre of Asian horror film, which differs remarkably from mobile phone movies from Hollywood (Castells et al., 2006).

The above is but a rapid sketch, mapping mobile modernities in Asia from a social and cultural perspective which hopefully provides some of the most essential background information for readers of this themed section of *New Media & Society*. In important ways, this overview offers a confirmatory note on the plurality of Asian mobile modernities and the necessity to conduct substantive empirical and conceptual analysis in the specific contexts of the localities. Only then can we appreciate this plurality, its relationship with western experiences, with each other and with other developing countries. On this basis, we can begin to approach the full theoretical implications of Asian mobile modernities for global ICT research at large.

Of course, the first question about 'mobile modernities' has to do with the technology itself: what kinds of mobile devices and services are popular in Asia, as opposed to those in Europe and North America and those in other developing countries? As with the internet, mobile systems consist of various products and services configured differently to meet a wide range of goals shaped in diverse contexts. Hence the selection, diffusion and appropriation of popular technologies can be taken as a window that reveals processes of constructing mobile modernities in Asia. This is the case with Little Smart (*Xiaolingtong*), a popular low-end wireless technology in China, which has spread to adjacent countries such as Vietnam. As Qiu's article in this issue indicates, in India and South Korea there are similar systems belonging to the Wireless Local Loop (WLL) variant of mobile technology, which all offer 'limited mobility' services with technical configurations differing significantly from the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) and Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA).

Limited mobility is a key to understanding mobile modernities in Asia, especially in rapidly industrializing societies. Much of the existing mobile communication literature rightly emphasizes the ubiquity and perpetuality of mobile phone connectivity in industrialized and post-industrial societies, both in the West and in Asia (e.g. Castells et al., 2006; Katz and Aakhus, 2002; Ling, 2004). But given wider technology diffusion and further market differentiation, we can observe the rise of low-end 'working-class ICTs', as opposed to high-end technologies for the upper and middle classes, and the emergence of the 'information have-less', which begins to fill the social gap known as the digital divide (Cartier et al., 2005). In this sense, Little Smart is a typical wireless working-class ICT for low-income users. A main lesson drawn from this study of Little Smart is that 'wireless mobility can be

localized' and that 'localized mobility may suit the daily life patterns of the information have-less' [(Qiu: 920 in this issue).]

While Qiu draws attention to the centrality of local knowledge, he also emphasizes institutional analysis of telecom reform processes, including formal policymaking and informal processes of implementation. The commercial success of Little Smart is argued to be an 'accidental accomplishment' created in a serendipitous manner due to overlapping conducive factors at the local, national and transnational levels. The most critical player is arguably the state, including both the nation-state and the local state, which adds to longstanding discussions on the developmental state model, as articulated by Samuels (1994) in the context of Japan.

Problems of the state are indeed essential to the structural formation of mobile modernities in Asia, a much larger process which includes the developmental state as one of many components. How, then, can state authorities manage the complex social, cultural and political challenges brought about by the diffusion of mobiles while reaping the economic benefits of ICTs? What does this mean for the transformation of the state-society relationship and power negotiations among the government, telecom industry and citizenry? Lu and Weber take on these important questions in their article 'State, Power and Mobile Communication: a Case Study of China', which offers a broad yet systematic analysis about new authoritarianism, the opening up of the private sphere through mobile communication and the concomitant structural constraints enforced through measures of 'strategic intervention' such as hotlines and online report systems, small fines and short jail sentences, as well as official propaganda and education campaigns. The result of such 'subtler control modalities (as compared to previous, more coercive methods)' is the trend toward 'controlled commodification' and the establishment of 'a relational contract between state, industry partners and citizenry' (Lu and Weber: 926 in this issue).

Of course, Lu and Weber's analysis is not just about the idiosyncrasy of the Chinese authorities and their 'socialist market economy'. Rather, 'strategic intervention' by the state and 'controlled commodification' at the societal level are features which have become increasingly prominent in the rest of Asia and the post-9/11 world at large, given the prevalence of commercialization alongside the ongoing 'War on Terrorism'. Thus, the many social concerns that trigger or are used to justify state intervention in China actually reflect similar issues elsewhere. These include culturally contested and unethical business practices (e.g. pornography, excessive charging by phone companies), public health 'rumours', nationalism and issues of 'stability', especially during protests. Most important, the extension of state power into the domain of mobile communication – often in alliance with corporate interests – is only one side of the coin. In establishing the 'relational contract', the state itself is transformed as well.

The third and final article is by Wilson and Thang, who conducted research on issues of cultural interpretation, identity and the pervasiveness of play in the context of Malaysia. They draw on philosophical traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics in an attempt to understand the processes of reception and response in mobile phone uses as a series of 'playful' or 'game-like' activities, i.e. the four 'moments' of absorbing, anticipating, articulating and appropriating 'mediated meaning'. In so doing, this article extends the analytical scope of Asian mobile modernities from social, institutional and organizational structures to the depth of the internalized cultural processes that make our experiences with the mobile phone meaningful.

Through semi-structured interviews, Wilson and Thang examine the narrative expressions of mobile phone culture to reveal the underlying patterns of ludic cognition and meaning generation. By including participants from different cultural backgrounds – multiculturalism is a basic social reality in Malaysia, as in many Asian societies – they explore ways to theorize beyond the immediate here and now, while constructing an overarching conceptual framework that spans multiple modes of mobile communication such as voice call, SMS and data download. In their words, 'narratives of cellphone use . . . can be considered local inflections of a global cognitive process, culturally particular accounts of a core universal undertaking' (Wilson and Thang: 959 in this issue).

This attempt to connect the specific with the universal is in fact common to all the articles in this themed section of *New Media & Society*. Albeit from different perspectives, evidence presented in the articles collectively shows the increasingly transnational nature of mobile development in Asia. The global flows of capital, labor and information have strengthened the ties among Asian countries, while making the region a more integral part of the global information society. It is on this planetary scale that we shall appreciate fully the empirical and theoretical value of mobile modernities in Asia. For these are not only models of diversity, within and beyond the region per se. They are, more importantly, a new opportunity for grounded theory construction at the global level about historical continuity, cultural transformation and social change.

Acknowledgements

We thank our colleagues Leopoldina Fortunati, Angel Lin, Raul Pertierra, Itaru Nagasaka, Shanhua Yang, Avin Tong and many Asian mobile communication researchers who supported our efforts in this endeavor. Comments and suggestions from the journal editors, Nicholas Jankowski and Steve Jones, as well as eight reviewers of the manuscripts, are also greatly appreciated. The original idea of this project was first conceived at the two-part conference on 'Mobile Communication and Asian Modernities' held in Hong Kong in June 2005 by the Department of English and Communication, City University of Hong Kong and in Beijing in October 2005 by France Telecom R&D Beijing, in

association with the Research Center for Social Theory, Peking University (October 2005). Although none of the articles in this themed section was presented in the two-part conference, we express our gratitude to the conference organizers for their invaluable inspiration.

References

- Barendregt, B. (2005) 'The Ghost in the Phone and Other Tales of Indonesian Modernity', paper presented at the International Conference on Mobile Communication and Asian Modernities I, Hong Kong, 7–8 June.
- Cartier, C., M. Castells and J.L. Qiu (2005) 'The Information Have-less: Inequality, Mobility and Translocal Networks in Chinese Cities', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 40(2): 9–34.
- Castells, M., M. Fernandez-Ardevol, J.L. Qiu and A. Sey (2006) *Mobile Communication and Society: a Global Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- de Bary, W.T. (1998) *Asian Values and Human Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Donner, J. (2007) 'M-Banking and M-Payments Services in the Developing World', paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA, 23–24 May.
- Fishman, T.C. (2006) *China Inc. How the Rise of the Next Superpower Challenges America and the World*. New York: Scribner.
- International Telecommunications Union (ITU) (2005) *World Telecommunication Indicators Database* (9th edn). Geneva: International Telecommunications Union.
- Ito, M., D. Okabe and M. Matsuda (2005) *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Katz, J. and M. Aakhus (2002) *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ling, R. (2004) *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*. San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kaufmann.
- Pertierra, R., E.F. Ugarte, A. Pingol, J. Hernandez and N.L. Dacanay (2002) *Text-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. Manila: De La Salle University Press.
- Samuels, R.J. (1994) *Rich Nation, Strong Army: National Security and the Technological Transformation of Japan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

JACK LINCHUAN QIU is assistant professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong. He researches on ICTs and class, globalization and late capitalism in the contexts of China and Asia.

Address: School of Journalism and Communication, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong. [email: jacklqiu@cuhk.edu.hk]

ERIC C. THOMPSON is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. He holds a PhD in sociocultural anthropology from the University of Washington and was previously a postdoctoral fellow at the UCLA Center for Southeast Asian Studies. He has conducted research on urbanism in Malaysia, ICT and academic networking in south-east Asia and the cultural production of south-east Asian regionalism.

Address: Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, AS1 #03–06, 11 Arts Link, 117570 Singapore. [email: socect@nus.edu.sg]
