

## Mobiles in Japan

Lynne Hamill

***Personal, Portable and Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life* edited by Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe and Misa Matsuda**

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Mobile network operators and researchers of mobile use in Europe have long looked to Japan for clues as to how the market may develop. Yet there has always lurked that question, "Japan is so different, how much can we learn from what is happening there?". The difficulty of accessing Japanese research outside Japan has meant that there have been rather few attempts to answer this question, although occasional papers such as by Tee (2005) and by Riviere and Licoppe (2003) have appeared. In this book, Ito and her co-editors have therefore made a valuable contribution to our understanding by providing a range of well-translated texts in English about the use of mobile devices in Japan.

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The title "portable, personal and pedestrian" refers not to technologies but to "action and experiences that can be altered and enhanced by new media technologies" (page 13). The book is organised "by theoretical and disciplinary categories" (page 14). Its 15 chapters are divided into five sections:

- The social and cultural construction of technological systems
- Cultures and imaginaries
- Social networks and relationships
- Practice and place
- Emergent developments.

The book raises issues that are sometimes the subject of heated sociological debate, such as the impact of technology on social solidarity and the relationship between society and the development of technology. However, in this review, I will focus on what this book tells us about the similarities between Japan and Europe, in particular the UK.

To start with, there is the use of language. *Keitai* is used to refer to the mobile phone and similar devices and simply translates as 'mobile'. The Japanese do not refer to '*keitai denwa*', meaning 'portable phone' just as in English we tend to talk about 'mobiles' rather than 'mobile phones'. It could be argued that this terminology reflects the extent

to which these devices have become normal and mundane.

As with the introduction of other new communication tools in the past, Matsuda (chapter 6), Habuchi (chapter 8), Tomita (chapter 9) and Miyake (chapter 14) note the 'moral panic' that *keitai* has caused by facilitating contact with strangers and by allowing children to communicate with other people without their parents' knowledge. There is nothing new here: these same fears were expressed when fixed line phones first appeared and even when the use of letters first became widespread. Nevertheless, real problems have arisen in Japan, and the authorities have regulated or even banned certain services (Tomita, chapter 9).

Yet, despite this concern about contact with strangers, most people use mobiles to keep in touch with those whom they already know, a group Habuchi calls the "telecocoon". Ito and Okabe (chapter 13) report that "heavy users of *keitai* ... were only in regular contact with approximately two to five, at most ten, close friends despite having large numbers of entries on their address books" (page 264). Miyata *et al* (chapter 7) provide a slightly different slant on the question of choice of communication channel by comparing internet access, primarily email, by desktop personal computer (PC) and by *keitai* respectively. *Keitai* are used for local contacts, the PC for longer distance communications.

Matsuda (chapter 6) notes that mobiles are used for what she calls "casual business": in a family that is the micro-management of daily living, while, for young singles, it is about arranging to meet. Dobashi (chapter 11) underlines the importance of mobiles for local communication when reporting that housewives use *keitai* largely to maintain family ties. In another example of using *keitai* to focus on everyday activities Kato *et al* (chapter 15) note how the incorporation of a camera in mobiles has resulted in people taking photos of more mundane events or objects than they would photograph with a traditional camera. All these findings will sound rather familiar to European researchers.

The adoption of mobiles by teenagers appears to be very like teenage use in Europe, but it started earlier with the use of pagers and focuses more on texting than voice. Okada (chapter 2) describes how Japanese teenagers used pagers to send text messages even though the devices had only numeric keypads! Kato (chapter 5) illustrates how the mobile

is embedded in the lives of young people as demonstrated by their difficulty in devising stories with a *keitai* theme because it is now just part of life. Kato reports that "when asked, 'What is *keitai* for you?' many Japanese youth reply 'I could never live without my *keitai*'" (page 114). European researchers report the same. Similar to Europe, in Japan it is the young girls who are keener users of mobiles than boys (Miyake, chapter 14).

The issue of talking to strangers has been noted but mobiles give rise to another problem concerning strangers, namely talking in front of strangers; private conversations held in public places, especially on public transport. This public/private conflict that is much discussed in European literature is reported in this volume by Fujimoto (chapter 4) and Okabe and Ito (chapter 10). In Japan, as Okabe and Ito describe, transport authorities actively discourage the use of mobiles on public transport to a much greater extent than in the UK. The fact that texting is acceptable on public transport and in other public places where voice is not may be an important reason why texting seems to be even more popular in Japan than in Europe.

Finally, Kohiyama (chapter 3) notes that innovations in pricing sparked the growth in demand in Japan as did the introduction of pre-paid, pay-as-you-go services in the UK. Furthermore, Miyake (chapter 14) notes how the introduction of pre-paid services and the imposition of upper limits on costs promoted the growth in the use of mobiles among children.

So the answer to the question, "Can we learn from Japan?", provided by this book is "yes". There are differences of course, but there are many similarities. This book will be helpful both to those interested in the use of mobile devices in Japan and, because of the ubiquity of these devices, to those with a wider interest in Japanese society.

## References

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