

# Imaging Communities: Gendered Mobile Media in the Asia-Pacific

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### Abstract

*In the rise of participatory, networked and social media epitomised by Web 2.0 and user created content (UCC), mobile media has been central in ushering in new types of consumer agency, creativity and collaboration. Through its rapid uptake across the world, the mobile phone has become a compelling symbol for contemporary post-industrial modes of labour and intimacy. In particular, the icon of the mobile phone is most palpable in the Asia-Pacific where a diversity of innovative production and consumption practices can be found. One of the dominant symbols of the region's mobile media has been the conspicuous symbol of the female mobile media user. And yet, the phenomenon—and its gendered implications—has been relatively under-explored. By charting the rise of gendered mobile media practices, we can gain insight into how technology, gender, labour and intimacy are being conceptualised and how this, in turn, is reconfiguring the region within the twenty-first century.*

*In this paper I draw from a longitudinal*

*cross-cultural case study of gendered mobile media conducted in Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong and Melbourne from 2000-2007. Deploying on interdisciplinary, ethnographic research conducted over a seven-year period, this paper examines the relationship between gender, technology, labour and intimacy through 'imaging communities'. Imaging communities can take multiple forms — form of texting, camera phone practices or mobile novels (keitai shôsetsu). These communities provide fresh ways for conceptualising the region's multiple cartographies of personalisation. Cartographies of personalisation are new socio-emotional and political economic maps for imaging and imagining the Asia-Pacific in an age of personalised media and Web 2.0.*



***The Art of Being Mobile (Larissa Hjorth 2004).***

**Introduction**

In recent years the imagination of the West, and indeed, of the East as well, has been captured by the dramatic emergence in East and Southeast Asia of a new middle class and a new bourgeoisie. On the television screens and in the press of Westerns countries, the images formerly associated with affluence, power and privilege in Asia—the generals, the princes and the party apparatchiks—however outmoded in reality, are being increasingly replaced by more recognisable symbols of modernity. Western viewers are now familiar with images of frustrated commuters in Bangkok and Hong Kong traffic jams, Chinese and

Indonesian capitalist entrepreneurs signing deals with Western companies; white-coated Malaysian or Taiwanese computer programmers and other technical experts at work in electronics plants; and, above all, crowds of Asian consumers at McDonalds or with the ubiquitous mobile phone in hand (Robison & Goodman 1996: 1).

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Asia-Pacific provides a compelling model for analysing emerging forms of post-industrialism and postmodernity. The region is a powerful player in the circulation of mobile technologies—both materially and symbolically—and in shaping the emerging lifestyle patterns associated with them. The cultural and economic power of global mobile technologies in the Asia-Pacific can no longer be sublimated under the symbol of Japan as the production epicentre of portable technologies such as the Sony Walkman. Concurrent to the rise of mobile technologies globally, the region has grown to become both a powerful economy and a conveyer of soft cultural capital. Through various forms of innovative mobile technology in locations such as Tokyo and Seoul, and the potentialities of colossal new markets—particularly China—the Asia-Pacific now plays an important role in global design, production and consumption circuits. In sum, the region's formidable economic power has

transformed into a rising cultural currency globally.

The multiple forms of cultural capital that the region commands worldwide are undisputed, particularly in the rise of mobile phone cultures as part of its techno-cultural capital. This phenomenon parallels the unshakable position mobile phone cultures occupy globally. With the world's highest mobile phone subscription rates (Mitomo et al. 2005; Castells et al. 2007) and housing key centres for globally innovative production (Tokyo, Shanghai and Seoul), the Asia-Pacific is unquestionably central; in this positioning we see the deep interconnections between mobile phone production, distribution, and consumption patterns. Given how central mobile phone production, distribution and consumption have been in the rise of the region as arguably this century's new global power center (Arrighi et al. 2003), to what extent is the transnational imaginary vested in, and represented by, the cultural index of the mobile phone?

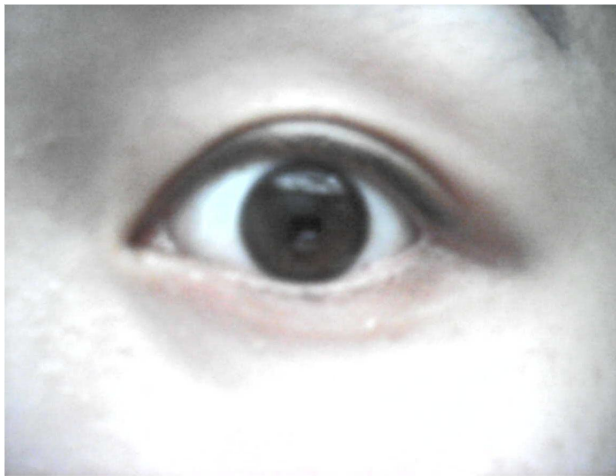
As the rise of the mobile phone into mobile media is marked by gendered practices of User Created Content (UCC), the examination of gendered mobile media provides much insight into the region in the twenty-first century. Central to the emergence of UCC is what I call 'imaging communities'. By 'imaging' I refer to all the mobile media UCC practices that take the form of visual, textual, aural and haptic modes of expression. From text messages to camera phone images, these practices of imaging communities reflect forms of

intimacy, labour, communication and creativity which provide ways for configuring, and intervening that shape the region's 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983). [1]

Rather than the region being the sum of what Benedict Anderson (1983) calls 'imagined communities'—that is, nations formed through the birth and rise of printing press and print media, what Anderson styles "print capitalism"—networked mobile media is best conceptualised as a series of ongoing, micro 'imaging communities' that span visual, textual and aural forms. Moreover, in contrast to Anderson's imagined communities that saw the rise of the nation lead to the demise of the local and vernacular, 'imaging communities' further amplify the local and the colloquial. In the case of 'imaging communities', each community shares, stores and saves its media in diverse ways reflecting localised gift-giving rituals and practices.

Equally striking is the fact that imaging communities frequently transcend national, and in some cases even regional, borders. For example, similar techniques of *sel-ca* (camera phone self-portraiture) can be found in the region — the only difference being how these images are saved and stored. In locations like Tokyo, *purikura* (stickers) are made and best friends collaboratively customise their phones with the ultimate personalisation — pictures of themselves. In Seoul, young women often take control of customising their boyfriend's phone so that they become mini-shrines to, and

perpetual reminders of, the girlfriends (and the need to call them)! Examples can be found where girlfriends save the *sel-ca* as a screen saver on their boyfriend's phones along with customising the outside of their phone. This act of feminising the phone signals out to others much like an engagement ring — the phone is the constant reminder (and significant in the maintenance) that “he is taken”.



**The i in the eye: girlfriend's eye is the screen saver on her boyfriend's phone (Larissa Hjorth 2005)**

These ‘imaging communities’ are indicative of emerging forms of gendered labour and intimacy comprising the region's cartographies of personalisation. On the basis of sample studies of imaging communities in four locations, I argue that we can begin to re-imagine the region's new socio-emotional and political economic maps through the rubric of cartographies of personalisation. Through recognition of the gendered character of mobile media,

we can also see how these modes of intimacy and labour reconfigure and reflect the region's post-industrial work / life patterns as part of broader cartographies of personalisation. Cartographies of personalisation are new maps reflective of the gendered media scapes and practices in the region. To chart the rise of mobile communication into mobile media is to trace the cartographies of personalisation.

The poignant role played by mobile phones—as both a symbol and set of material practices—can be mapped back to the rise, fall and reemergence of new forms of consumption and labour around the region's 1997 financial crisis. As Richard Robison and David S.G. Goodman noted, through the symbol of the mobile phone we can gain great acuity into the region's emerging ‘new rich’ (1996) that operate as an index for new forms of post-industrial lifestyle narratives in which consumption and production are reconceptualised (Chua 2000). The adoption of the mobile phone—partly because of its ‘class’ status and lifestyle—suggests a localised appropriation of consumption and post-industrialism. [2] Since 1997 the mobile phone has shifted from the symbol of the new rich and economical mobility to being adopted by young and old in a variety of ways. These shifts in the usage and meanings of the mobile phone can be seen as reflective of the consumption and production paradigm changes in the region post 1997.

Indeed once a symbol for a rising class and leisure culture in the region, the



mobile phone has come to encompass diverse social, cultural and economic dimensions. These dimensions are multiple, divergent and always evolving, like the region itself. In these emerging lifestyle cultures we can see a variety of attendant forms of gendered mobility and immobility — epitomised by the forms of labour and intimacy surrounding mobile media. To explore mobile technologies is to investigate the ongoing significance of localisation practices — that is, the deployment of personalisation. As the politics of leisure and work increasingly become intertwined, processes of personalisation can provide insight into the growing geo-imaginaries of the twenty-first century.



### **Waiting for immediacy (Larissa Hjorth 2004)**

In the case of the Asia-Pacific, in which mobile technologies are both the symbol and product of high post-industrialisation, mobile media epitomises new cartographies of localised labour and intimacy. Not only operating

as a poignant symbol for emerging classes and attendant modes of lifestyle, the mobile phone has become intrinsically linked to personalisation techniques as expressions of labour, creativity and intimacy. More significantly, these changes are correlated with shifts in gender and power relations. To study how the mobile phone has transformed into mobile media is to analyse new practices of female labour and intimacy in the Asia-Pacific.

As pioneers in mobile communications globally, the region's various production centres have seen this technological development, and the politico-economic power it secures, translated into new forms of cultural capital both within and beyond the region. For example, technological innovation has been instrumental in the rise of South Korea's transcultural capital in the form of the Korean wave (*Hallyu*). Once a centre for the production of domestic-technology hardware, Korea has become a major exporter of cultural products in the form of films, TV dramas and online games. As well as housing global leaders in the development, innovation, manufacture and distribution of mobile technologies, the Asia-Pacific has also reflected emergent paradigms around user agency and technologies. From the example of the Japanese high-school girl pager revolution in the early 1990s to the camera phone empowerment pioneered by women in Seoul in the early 2000s, the region is awash with the rise of mobile phone users, and agency, inextricably linked to female users. This phenomenon

has resulted in its domestication of mobile technologies implicitly tied to gendered practices of consumption. Thus to explore mobile consumption is to investigate the emergence of gender inflected technologies in shaping consumer identities and post-industrial imaginaries.



***Keitai kimono: remediated and feminised new media (Larissa Hjorth 2004)***

As a key icon of mobile phone consumption, the construction and representation of the young female Asian ‘produser’ operates across multiple levels — national, transnational, governmental, social, cultural and economic. The rise of the mobile phone has been accompanied by increased subversive appropriation of the technology by the active female user. Parallels can be drawn with other domestic technologies, illustrating the instrumental role of gender and power in inscribing technology with the socio-cultural. [3]

Thus the mobile phone is a poignant symbol, and set of material practices within the region’s various contesting cartographies. Yet despite its pivotal role in the global production, distribution, and consumption of mobile technologies, the region has been under-explored (McLelland 2007). Moreover, the crucial role of the young Asian female as synonymous with the rise of mobile media and UCC practices has also been overlooked. These new gendered forms of media creativity and storytelling, ‘imaging communities’, are inflected by the local and the contingent. The rise of gendered mobile media practices in the Asia-Pacific has produced, and reflected, new cartographies of personalisation. In order to examine these new cartographies, it is necessary to show how the mobile phone becomes a tool for new practices of personalisation and new imaginings of geography.



### DoCoMo girl (Larissa Hjorth 2004)

The obvious role of gender in shaping mobile media practices has been largely overlooked beyond the studies that have conflated women with youth and fashion. Drawing on a revised notion of Judith Butler's (1991) 'gender performativity' in which gender is seen as not innate but rather is naturalised by regulated actions, I argue that in the case of the region and the gendered use of socio-technologies, we can see a 'gendered performativity' that differs dramatically from Western or Eurocentric identity and subjectivity. This is evident in the case of gendered mobile phone customisation in the Asia-Pacific whose distinctive patterns and meanings differentiate it from other world regions.

In examining gendered practices in the region there is a need to analyse new forms of intimacy and labour. Indeed, through women's deployment of mobile media and UCC practices, we can explore some of the emerging paradigms for labour and creativity that suggest new—and also rehearse and adapt older or what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) call 'remediated'—media tactics in which women figure prominently. Via the rubric of gendered mobile media, we can investigate patterns of intimacy, creativity and labour that are produced by, and within, the region's cartographies of personalisation.

In order to do so, we need to locate the place of the region's gendered mobile media in the context of mobile communication research. In this first section, I trace a gendered genealogy of mobile media literature and mobile communication research. This is followed by the second section, 'maps of personalisation', where I discuss how the personalisation of mobile phones and mobile media can be considered as a new way of mapping the region via the rubric of cartographies of personalisation. Epitomised by UCC, cartographies of personalisation are best understood through the relationship between media convergence and intimacy. They are marked by the shift from mobile phone (as a means of communication) to mobile media (as a form of creativity and expression), and the consequent production of new forms of gendered intimacy and labour. Personalisation is linked to, and an expression of, the



various attendant forms of mobility — social, geographic, technological, economic. It is also a reflection of emerging forms of gendered labour (creative, social, affective and emotional) and intimacy. Personalisation takes material and immaterial forms that converge as they diverge upon micro (individual) and macro (communities, national and transnational) levels.

In the third section, ‘Beyond “The New Rich”: Re-imagining the region’, we consider how micro imaging communities (such as those that use / deploy UCC) can reveal macro cartographies of personalisation as part of broader post-industrial lifestyle movements. Here I reflect upon emerging forms of post-industrial lifestyle narratives that have arisen since the pivotal 1997 economic crisis and how, by engaging in the micro imaging communities, we can begin to reconceptualise current models of cultural consumption and production within the Asia-Pacific.



**Dislocated localisation (Larissa Hjorth 2004)**

### **1.1 Locating the mobile: current literature in the field**

... the mobile phone is far too much of a newborn creature to have a storied history, or even much of a reputation in social science research. Its advent and rapid evolution have bypassed most researchers who are deeply engaged in their own research pursuits, but few if any social scientists would fail to recognise the impact this technology has had on all of us and on aspects of our behaviour (Beaton &



Wajcman 2004: 2).

As mobile technologies grew from the twentieth into the twenty-first century, they were marked by the transformation from communication into media. One of the defining features of this paradigmatic shift was the rise of the active user playing a pivotal, co-producer role in the orchestration of the device into a form of creative and expressive media. Despite the ubiquity of mobile media with global everyday life, this all-pervasive phenomenon has only recently gained critical attention. This paucity is especially apparent in one of the main global producers, distributors, and consumers of mobile media, the Asia-Pacific. In particular, the dominant role played by the female mobile media user has yet to be fully addressed. To chart the rise of mobile media in the region is to do so in the context of localised forms of gender.

As Beaton and Wajcman observe, the social impact of the relatively nascent rise of mobile communication cannot be ignored. In their important study of Australian mobile telephony, they note the transformation and diffusion of boundaries between traditional private and public spheres (2004: 9), a trend that sees mobile telephony penetrating 'new geographic spaces that enable the consumption and communication process to be applied in new social, cultural and psychological spaces' (2004: 12). In 'Intimate Connections: The Impact of the Mobile Phone on Work Life Boundaries' (2009), Wajcman et al. note that the mobile phone 'characterises modern

times and life in the fast lane' and has become iconic of 'work-life balance'—or lack thereof—in contemporary life (2009: 9). These boundaries of time and space are determined, in part, by 'debates about work/life boundaries' that are imbued by traditional gendered divides 'between the separate spheres for market work (male) and domestic work (female) wrought by industrialisation' (2009: 10). Thus the mobile phone is deeply implicated in debates around various forms of mobility and immobility that cut across gender, labour, technology and capital within contemporary globalisation.

This is, in part, due to the multiple dimensions of mobile communication as metaphor, icon, culture and practice. As a consequence, it lends itself to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary analyses. At mobile communication conferences the rooms are filled with sociologists, media theorists, anthropologists, philosophers, new media artists, economists and IT researchers. The mobile phone can be read for its social, technological, economic, and creative properties. And yet within this burgeoning area gaps remain — most notably the role of the mobile phone as a cultural index, the implications of the mobile phone within the changing modernity of the Asia-Pacific, and the way in which the rise of the mobile phone as a symbol and practice is imbued with gendered genealogies. Despite the region's significant role in producing, marketing and consuming mobile technologies, it has gained little focus in

comparison to mobile communication research in Europe. Of the handful of researchers specialising on the region, only a few such as anthropologist Genevieve Bell have explored the role of mobile communication in the region, with most focused on specific locations such as Tokyo, Seoul, and the Philippines.

Unsurprisingly, the early studies of the mobile phone—which were highly inflected by gender—can be traced to its formation and transformation from the landline. As with the landline, the emergence of mobile phone technology was marked by an appropriation of the mobile phone’s original intended use as a business tool into an instrument for social and domestic use, notably by younger women. This transformation from male business tool to vehicle for female social “gossip” and reproductive / social labour has indelibly marked the history of telephony. Despite this gendered formation, the pivotal role of gender in the domestication of the technology into a cultural and social practice has been marginalised in the literature, with researchers preferring to emphasise the ‘youth’ aspects and relegating gendered customisation to the realm of fashion or motherhood. This is astounding given the often subversive ways in which female users in the region have transformed the technology as part of rapidly increasing socio-cultural media practices.

The first studies of mobile culture around the early 1990s tended to highlight the implicit role that gender played in the emergence and transformation of the business technology into a socio-cultural

practice. Ann Moyal’s (1992) study on gender and the (landline) telephone in Australia was an earlier pioneer in what would become mobile communication research. Patricia Gillard’s research in Australia in the 1990s (particularly with the Australian government) was significant in conceptualising new models for studying telecommunications as a cultural practice. Michele Martin’s (1991a & b) eloquent study explored the transformation of the telephone from business tool to a feminised social and cultural artefact. [4]

In a similar vein as Martin’s study, Lana Rakow’s (1992) lucid study investigated some of the ways in which gender has informed conventions around telephonic practices. The issue of reproductive labour and the shifting politics of ‘care cultures’ that Arlie Hochschild details so vividly in her research is presciently outlined in Rakow’s and Vija Navarro’s (1993) ‘Remote Mothering and the Parallel Shift: Women Meet the Cellular Telephone’. Here, the role of the telephone as both a product and symbol of particular types of emotional and reproductive labour is emphasised. Despite the fact that during these interesting early years the rise of mobile communication was clearly invested with gendered politics and the socio-cultural economies of the domestic sphere, history repeated itself. Like the landline that started off as a business tool, to be later transformed—feminised—by women into a socio-cultural practice and artefact, the mobile phone replicated the same cycle. So why, second time around,

has gender continued to be relegated to a minor field while the exciting, sexy, fun field of “youth cultures” continues to dominate?



**The mother of all mobility with baby in the hand (Larissa Hjorth 2005)**

Despite the reality of aging populations and mainstream practices, the conflation between youth and new technologies only perpetuates stereotypes about youth subcultures and the wayward role of new technologies. Just as the conceptualisation of women’s labour has been simplified around mobile media globally—despite its instrumental role in the phenomenal rise of mobile media and UCC—so too has the role of the region

been under-explored. Moreover, the significance of personalisation techniques integral in the symbolic and material dimensions of mobile media has been ignored or simplified as the prerogative of youth fashion. As Gerard Goggin eloquently notes,

... it is fair to say that thus far scholarly study of cell phones has been dominated by a focus on European and North American examples and assumptions. Work on cell phones in other parts of the world—especially Asia—is now emerging, as it is, rather too slowly, in studies of Internet and other new media.... The mobile, as too the Internet, has been mutually implicated in cultural and social change in Asia (Goggin 2006: 13).

Indeed, as Goggin identifies in his survey of mobile literature, the role of the region’s mobile media practices—reflecting broader cultural, social, economic and ideological features—has yet to be fully recognised. This, as Goggin notes, is partly to do with the fact that early studies were not written in the *lingua franca* of English. It is also to do with the fact that a lot of the emerging research on socio-technologies in the region focused just upon the Internet that, in the case of locations such as Japan, arose pretty much concurrently with the mobile phone. In this sense, such locations have gained global attention as possible examples of

the future of convergent technologies in a networked society. Moreover, the fact that many collections on global trends in mobile phone studies deployed Western or Eurocentric notions of individualism and consumption as given undermined opportunities for understanding the complexity of localised mobile phone cultures and practices in the region.

Mobile communication research in the region has, like the region itself, evolved unevenly. The first studies on locations in the region to be published in English, unlike those in Europe which tend to take a sociological perspective, took the form of anthropological inquiry — most notably Mizuko Ito's in Japan (2002) and Raul Pertierra's in the Philippines (2002, 2003). Both Ito and Pertierra have gone on to conduct pivotal case studies that have brought a wealth of knowledge and rigour to the literature. In particular they showed ways in which, by analysing the cultural and social implications of mobile phone practices and cultures, one can gain insight into the micro and macro encompassing intimacy, co-presence, individualism, place, lifestyle, community, social capital and even notions of national culture.

Shin Dong Kim's two studies on the role of the mobile phone in Korea—as a vehicle for political agency (2002) and for reinforcing cultural and national identification with familial hierarchies (2003)—were significant in highlighting the role of technologies within the national. They also showed that despite the proclivity towards already existing modes of individualism (and

individualisation) in locations such as Japan, in places such as Korea—where the notion of family was significant as a motif for identity and nationalism—the mobile phone participated in further consolidating a sense of community. Kyongwon Yoon (2003, 2006) cited the role of the mobile phone as a repository for techno-nationalist 'cyber-Confucianism' serving to reinforce these traditional ties, particularly in terms of intergenerational hierarchies.

The aforementioned studies of Korea and Japan have highlighted how both locations exemplify localised forms of mobile phone practices that are marked by gender and generational differences. In the context of these two very distinct models of gendered generational divisions, the mobile phone is not just a social phenomenon; rather, it is also a technology for governing and rescripting national culture. The production and consumption of mobile technologies feature prominently in government policy as noted in the white pages and telecommunication ministry reports. Mobile technologies function significantly on economic and cultural levels both within and outside the nation-state. An example is Samsung and its symbolic role as a technological, but also cultural, icon of Korea. [5]

Despite the field of mobile communication currently witnessing a rise of anthologies and conferences that have attempted to address this glaring omission, a large gap remains. More recently, there have been a series of anthologies that attempt to contextualise



‘Asia’, whether in the context of mass communications, European or global communication. Indian mass communications scholar Madanmohan Rao has released two reviews on communication technologies in the context of both Asia (with Mendoza 2004) and the Asia-Pacific (2004) but these collections take a predominantly quantitative political economic view and neglect to address the pivotal role these technologies play at a grass-roots level. As Mark McLelland (2007) observes in his review of both books, although the titles seemed promising, the books were aimed at journalist and industry specialists rather than academics and they focused on governmental policies while completely ignoring the socio-cultural dimensions of technologies. Moreover the data was collected pre-2003, before mobile phones and the Internet had been fully immersed at the level of everyday practice in the region.

Arguably, the most interesting anthologies on the social and cultural dimensions of technologies in the region were those that took a cultural studies approach to critiquing the Anglocentric and English domination of such technologies as the Internet. 2003 saw the arrival of two anthologies that attempted to address this gap not only by exploring non-Western models for thinking about subjectivity and technology, but also by investigating how these non-Western paradigms played out in transnational flows in the region. In *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia* Berry et al. (2003) addressed the

often overlooked but profoundly important role of sexuality and gender performativity that challenged normalised, Western, heterosexual models.

Similarly, Nanette Gottlieb and McLelland’s (2003) (eds) *Japanese Cybercultures* sought to uncover the multiple forms of subjectivity, individuality and community that were utilising the then nascent Internet. In the case of Japan, where the introduction to the Internet was via the *keitai*, the collection provided an early study into mobile media. This was followed by K.C. Ho, Randolph Kluver and Kenneth C.C. Yang’s (2003) edited Internet anthology *Asia@com* that explored, through the lens of both cultural and political economy frameworks, the arising and uneven spread of socio-technologies in the region. And yet, as McLelland identifies in his rigorous survey of the literature in the region, many studies fall ‘back upon default references to a standardised or normalised pattern of usage in “the West”’ (2007: 275).

This ‘default’ setting—to appropriate Lisa Nakamura’s (2002) usage of it in terms of Japan being the West’s science-fiction backdrop—is found in so many of the anthologies in which wonderful individual studies on locations such as China or Korea get conceptualised within a Western/Eurocentric model of culture and society. The attempt to readdress this problem surrounding so much of the English language literature is the rubric for McLelland and Goggin’s (2009) *Internationalizing Internet Studies* in

which they draw from case studies and theoretical tropes that do not oscillate around Western precepts.

Some anthologies have been more successful than others in attempting to reorient the axis away from ‘global’ mobile communication as another word for Western/European or Anglophonic frameworks. Pertierra’s (ed.) engaging *The Social Construction and Usage of Communication Technologies: European and Asian Experiences* (2007), a publication of a conference held in 2004, attempted to address the trope about East / West notions more vigilantly than previous “global” studies collections such as James Katz and Mark Aakhus’s (eds) *Perpetual Contact* (2002), which took the Western or Eurocentric notions as a universal given. So too, Law et al.’s collection *New Technologies in Global Societies* (2006), arising from a sociological conference in 2004, seeks to give China as much focus as Italy. This collection has some fascinating studies, most particularly on China as exemplified by Garland Liu and Joel Law’s (2006) poignant look at the politics of technology in the sex industry. However, again, the rubric regarding the different cultural histories that underlie the divergent uptake of technologies is not fully explored in the array of different methodologies and fragmented case studies.

Manuel Castells et al.’s *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective* (2007) provides an ambitious overview. In attempting to surmise the mass of research on global mobile

communication, the collection has some wonderful insights—such as Jack Qiu’s work on migrant workers in China—despite being overshadowed by Castells’s dogmatic insistence on conceptualising the material under his rubric of the rise of the networked society. Unfortunately, owing to the uneven-ness of the material, the sum of the individual authors’ specific case studies (in three regions) do not equate to the global diversity claimed by the book. Some locations such as China were discussed with wonderful depth and reflexivity, while others such as Japan were represented only through secondary literature reviews that demonstrated a cursory understanding of the research without providing insight into the cultural context. [6]

Moreover, the issue of gendered practices received little attention, despite the fact that the female consumer dominated the visual imagery commonly associated with mobile phone use in the region. Gendered practices were relegated to the discussion of consumption and fashion, ignoring the extensive work conducted by feminists on debates around work / life, reproductive labour and intimacy, consumerism, the practice of co-presence (online / offline) in the form of virtuality and corporeality. Discussions about youth cultures prevailed, further entrenching the conflation between new technology and youth cultures. In 2005, conferences in the region began to take centre stage, fully engaging with the potential of mobile communications—as both a social

and cultural practice—to address issues of Asian modernities. [7] This shift has continued, albeit slowly. [8]

The lack of research is surprising considering the pioneering innovations and adoptions in the region: for example the handset and software development paraded by Korea's Samsung and LG, and the business ecology success story of Japan's DoCoMo i-mode, which was the first mobile phone with Internet. The diversity of government and industry regulations, as well as of socio-cultural and linguistic factors, makes the Asia-Pacific a rich model for comprehending some of the complex ways in which mobile communication is localised. The lack of research is due, in part, to the difficulties in addressing the socio-cultural, linguistic, economic and political differences that encompass the region — issues that I address in the following section of this chapter.

Moreover, the fact that the region has been the site for the mobile phone's convergent growth into mobile media also complicates its readings. Indeed, to analyse mobile media requires an understanding of its convergent nature that underlies the increase in cartographies of personalisation. Hence, in order to gain a sense of the expanse of mobile phone cultures we need to explore one of its most pervasive phenomena, namely its convergence into mobile media.



### **The affects of techno-cute (Larissa Hjorth 2005)**

## **1.2 Maps of personalisation: convergence @ mobile media**

The mobile phone has become the Swiss army knife of consumer electronics, becoming by turn a games machine, emailer, camera, or news browser. Heck, you can even talk to people on them. This feature creep has gone so far it's tempting to think it cannot go much further. But new technologies on the horizon in Japan, the market most infatuated with the mobile, suggest the idea of a

phone as a do-everything gadget still has a lot of mileage in it (Boyd 2005: 28).

As convergence leaves its mark in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the ultimate exemplar is the mobile device. Within contemporary culture, convergence is occurring across various levels — technological, industrial social, economic, and cultural. Far from a mere form of communication the mobile phone has become a multimedia device par excellence — a plethora of various applications that operate across aural, textual and visual economies. It is a repository for many performances of localised forms of intimacy, propinquity and co-presence. In the region, the rise of convergent mobile media is interwoven with the growth in personalisation techniques. The personalisation of mobile media, at both an individual and collective level, reflects localised notions of intimacy. Thus to explore mobile media convergence in the region is to investigate expressions of intimacy.

The convergent role of mobile media is unquestionably linked to its deployment of personalisation techniques — a phenomenon vividly highlighted by the region. As both Tokyo and Seoul have been centres for technological innovation and high early adopter practices, both locations attracted some of the first case studies of convergent mobile media such as camera phones that have also been studies in personalisation practices. The convergence of the mobile phone with multimedia—thus becoming part of new media discourses—has seen it form a

discursive space in which various histories, genealogies and cultures combine. Thus mobile media have gained much interest in terms of new media debates, particularly those focusing on one of the dominant phenomena of globalisation, convergence. This has led media studies expert Henry Jenkins to characterise contemporary culture as *Convergence Culture* (2006). For Jenkins, media is no longer produced for consumers but rather consumers (or producers) play an active role in what he has defined as ‘participatory’ media (2006a).

As Jenkins observes, this media and technological convergence of participatory culture is occurring simultaneously with socio-cultural divergence. The uptake of convergent mobile media is inextricably linked to the local. Why convergence has been so instrumental in mobile media is undoubtedly linked to its deployment of the personal and intimate. That is, its logic is indelibly linked to the politics of personalisation.

In the Asia-Pacific—with global pioneers such as Tokyo and Seoul—convergence and personalisation had been part of everyday mobile communication from the outset. Personalisation makes convergence intimate. From adorning the outside of the phone with cute customisation to creating UCC, cartographies of personalisation render the media intimate. However, these connections have often been ignored or deemed as expressions of ‘youth culture’ in global media. Often these locations



have gained global mass media attention as potential futures of mobile media without contextualising the relationship between convergence and intimacy. The transformation of mobile media from a communication to a creative medium must not only be understood as a form of convergence, but also, specifically, how this convergence is shaped by personalisation. Personalisation techniques help users negotiate the contemporary post-industrial work-life patterns and how different forms of mobility inform, and are informed by, localised notions of intimacy.

The rise of convergent mobile media, rehearsing older media as well as defining new forms of expression, can be viewed as an extension of mobile phone customisation and exemplary of the rise in personalisation techniques. Early examples of gendered mobile media personalisation took the form of customising the hardware by attaching a cute character to the phone. It was not long before these customising techniques began to be inscribed inside of the device (i.e. software) as a way of reflecting a sense of self and community. These personalisation techniques echo global trends whereby social, affective and creative labour is increasingly being conflated both symbolically and materially. Just as Jenkins observed that accompanying convergence was its twin, divergence, Castells asserted that in the rise of socio-technologies (or what he would call 'networked societies', 1996) such as the Internet, increasing standardisation would be met by arising

customisation (2001). Once living outside the phone in the form of characters hanging from the device, mobile phone customisation has become increasingly convergent, migrating to the inside of the phone in the form of customised camera phone images, text messages, screen savers, and music. Mobile customisation demonstrates new forms of gendered intimacies and modes of labour that are part of the broader cartographies of personalisation.

We can view customisation as helping to traverse the co-presence of mobile technologies in everyday life, making intimate and thus incorporating the new technology into already existing cultural rituals and practices. Customisation outside the device can express tastes about the user to strangers in public spaces. What adorns the user may choose can draw on peer group commonalities, or be a memento of a treasured intimate experience. The growth in customising inside the mobile phone through mobile media such as SMS and camera phone images can be about maintaining intimate co-presence with friends and family. These forms of customised mobile media practice can also be deployed exclusively by the user as a repository for memories, experiences, expressions of creativity and more. Concurrent with this oscillation between inside and outside, internal and external customisation, has been discussions of mobile media as a 'democratisation' of multimedia.

It is in this space that we see an awkward transition in the history of the medium

from its beginnings as a social, communicative device to its industry-hyped potential as a creative (and commercial) venture. This convergence echoes the rise of user-generated modes of intimacy and labour. As an extension of Alvin Toffler's (1980) notion of 'prosumers', whereby he saw the diffusion between consumers and producers as a symptom of increasing confluences between work and social life, current proclamations about the potential of mobile media as an artistic and political tool for the people further develop these themes around post-industrial lifestyle. In everyday life, practices of the prosumer can be found everywhere, but it is within the convergent space of mobile media that emerging paradigms of the users appear. 'Users' are no longer just passive consumers; they are prosumers or 'co-creators' (Katz & Sugiyama 2005: 79). Or, in the case of mobile media convergence with Web 2.0, the user is part of the 'produser' revolution of UCC (Burns 2005).

Through the rise of mobile media characterised by the appearance of the active user, new forms of mobility, intimacy and labour occur. The transformation of the everyday user into photo-journalists was highlighted by the rise of netizen media such as online *OhMy News* and the election of President Roh in Korea. These examples demonstrate shifts in labour and citizen agency, where unofficial imaging communities become part of official media expressions. As Castells et al.

observe, 'communication can be both instrumental and expressive' (2007: 153). With tools such as texting, emailing, camera phone imagery, video and sound, the mobile phone provides many vehicles for self-expression. These forms of expression play across various levels — individual, social and cultural. Such practices as texting can 'express social inequalities' (Pertierra 2006: 100) concurrent to creating 'an amplification of inner subjectivity' (Pertierra 2006: 101).

The rise of mobile media has been shaped by convergence and personalisation, demonstrated in genres such as camera phone imagery and SMS to the coordination of these practices with Internet peer-to-peer sharing. Extending practices of analogue photography through its so-called democratising of photographic media, camera phones are affording users the ability to document, re-present and perform the everyday. These emerging practices are underscored by the "exchange" and gift-giving economy of the mobile phone (Taylor & Harper 2002, 2005) that sees new forms of sharing and distribution through various contextual frameworks from MMS, blogs, virtual community sites to actual face-to-face digital storytelling.

Thus the content of mobile media practices such as camera phones are informed by what Ito and Daisuke Okabe (2003a, 2005b) have defined as the 'three S's' — saving, storing and sharing. These 'three S's' shape the interpretations and audiences of camera phone practices through networks / contexts, distribution

and interactivity. Such processes must be understood in terms of mobile media ‘remediation’ and convergence of older media. Mobile media rehearses older forms of intimacy as it expands and enables new forms of what it means to be intimate. One method for conceptualising contemporary mobile media and attendant maps of personalisation would be vis-à-vis the rise and transformation of the icon of late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernity, the *flâneur*. [9]

Convergence needs to be conceptualised within broader, historical processes of mediated intimacy. Indeed, today’s mobile media can be seen as an extension of nineteenth and twentieth century mobile media such as the wristwatch (Kopomaa 2000). Technologies such as mobile media also re-enact earlier co-present practices and interstitials of intimacy: for example SMS re-enacts nineteenth century letter writing traditions (Hjorth 2005b). New forms of telepresence such as email can be linked to earlier practices of co-present intimacy such as visiting cards (Milne 2004). Against these developments, mapping the cartographies of personalisation require us to conceptualise intimacy beyond a Western, heteronormative and face-to-face model. Rather, the intimate co-presence enacted by mobile technologies should be viewed as part of a lineage of technologies of propinquity (Milne 2004; Hjorth 2005b). Through mobile media different models for intimacy can be provided and performed — an obvious example is the way in which non-direct

modes such as SMS afford reserved individuals with a way to express their feelings that they might not do face-to-face. Thus, in order to understand the maps of personalisation in the region, we need a model of ‘mobile intimacy’.

The issue of mobile intimacy as a localised labour practice has begun to appear in ethnographies of the region. For Pertierra, it is through notions of intimacy that we can gain insight into the symbolic dimensions of the mobile phone in everyday Filipino life (2005a, 2005b). This idea is extended in the wonderfully eloquent discussion of Randy Solis into the constructions of ‘romance’ involved in mobile media practices in the Philippines (2007). Mediated intimacy is not seen as secondary to face-to-face intimacy, but rather, an equally important aspect. For Deirdre McKay (2007) Filipino houseworkers in Hong Kong utilise the mobile phone to provide forms of intimacy that were previously not available. Mobile phones allow houseworkers to continuously maintain relationships with friends and family back home. McKay observes that in order to investigate ‘the emotional dynamics and material structures that characterise a socially embedded transnationalism’ (2007: 175), we need to utilise new models for viewing migrants as diverse agents rather than as heterogeneously passive victims of globalisation. She also observes that we need to comprehend notions of intimacy as part of the practice of global post-structuralism, and debunk the authorisation around conventional Western and romanticised notions of

face-to-face intimacy being more legitimate than remediated versions.

As Lauren Berlant observes, intimacy has taken on new geographies and forms of mobility, most notably as a kind of ‘publicness’ (1998: 281) that is epitomised by the mobile phone. Here we see both the gestures and spaces of intimacy drawing from a history of ‘emotional grammars’ (Beatty 2005) as well as being an increasingly commodified notion that is performed. As part of emerging emotional grammars and ‘geographies of intimacy’ (Margaroni & Yiannopoulou 2005) across visual, textual, aural and haptic registers, this phenomenon constitutes the cartographies of personalisation. These geographies of intimacy are indelibly shaped by the role of the local and the vernacular, as well as being part of a broader global trend towards personalisation that are exemplified by the rise of Web 2.0 SNSs and the full-time intimacy afforded by mobile media. It is important to recognise that geographies of intimacy—or maps of personalisation—are not just a product of the ‘newness’ of mobile media but that they feed into broader shifts in post-industrial consumption and production processes.

It is also imperative not to fetishise the newness of mobile media, but rather—like the study of new media (Bolter & Grusin 1999; Huhtamo 1997)—to view it as transforming already existing practices. The convergence that is mobile media, as argued earlier, must be understood with broader histories of

mediated intimacy that both rehearse and rewrite older methods (Hjorth 2005a). An influential theorist in the field of media-archaeology, Erkki Huhtamo has argued that the cyclical phenomena of media tend to transcend historical contexts, often placating a process of paradoxical re-enactment and re-enchantment with what is deemed as ‘new’ (1997). For Jussi Parikka and Jaakko Suominen, the procedural nature of media archaeology means ‘new media is always situated within continuous histories of media production, distribution and usage — as part of a longer duration of experience’ (2006: n.p).

As Lev Manovich (2003) noted, contemporary new media and digital practice are consumed by fetishising the spectres of the analogue. In an age of highly edited and photoshopped images circulating various sites of public confessionals by intimate strangers, the camera phone image provides an antidote. As Hille Koskela notes, ‘by revealing their intimate lives, people are liberated from shame and the ‘need’ to hide, which leads to something called “empowering exhibitionism”’ (2004: 199). The more computer generated imagery (CGI) increases in sophistication, the more users demand their mobile media to be about the aesthetics of banality (Koskinen 2007). The banal, as part of personalisation techniques and tactics, renders mobile media UCC ‘authentic’; the deployment of the banal is part of the performance of intimacy. It should also be noted that to partake in the banal is to participate in power relations around



normalisation and naturalisation (Morris 1998). Through the banal, gendered mobile media produces maps of personalisation that help to rescript a sense of place, providing avenues for both challenging and reinforcing localities.

Indeed, through the convergence of mobile telephony into mobile media we witness new cartographies. As Ilpo Koskinen notes, mobile multimedia, unlike mobile telephony, has the ability to ‘re-territorialize’ experiences and communication (2007: 48-60). Building on discourses of analogue photographic practices and the proclaimed democratising of photographic media, camera phones are affording users with new, and yet remediated, ways to document, re-present, and perform the everyday. These practices reflect the relationship between mobile intimacy and a reterritorialising of place. For example, camera phone practices enact a sense of intimacy with immediacy, performing the ‘power of now’ (Wilhelm, Takhteyev, Sarvas, Van House, & Davis 2004). This is evident in the rise of UCC and photojournalism whereby everyday mobile media user skills become part of a burgeoning new profession.

Mobile media’s commitment to a particular genre of realism—as evidenced by camera phone practices and MMS—is situated around ‘the mundane as a problem’ (Koskinen 2007: 50). As Koskinen observes, it is the demonstration of the banal that is important in defining the sender as ‘ordinary’ and thus *reliable*. For Barbara

Scifo, camera phone practices operate on ‘two different levels of experience’ — ‘on an individual level’ and ‘on the socialisation level’ (2005: 365). I would add to this process a *meta-social* level, a concept whereby users become hyper-reflexive to the ways in which their mobile media content can be read — as well as misread. Many users speak of the fear of losing their phone and the way in which this could empower the stranger who finds it. Users of cute customisation also often note its ambiguity that opens up spaces for multiple and contradictory interpretations. The rise of increased forms of distribution also increases the various contexts for interpretation and misinterpretation. For example, in the case of Korean camera phone practices, female users often re-appropriate the depictions of female imagery seen in media in a form of gendered performativity that could be read without irony and parody by strangers. In Melbourne, the deployment of cute customisation around gendered performativity is informed by a multiplicity of different ethnicities.



### **Melbourne and Korean politics of mobile media personalisation (Larissa Hjorth 2006)**

Mobile media use convergence to localise intimacy. In these new maps of personalisation, the content of mobile media becomes subject to choices of viewing/sharing *context*. Rather than gendered mobile media being seen as merely reinforcing narcissist and exhibitionist forms of 'public' intimacy and the pretence of 'participatory' culture, we need to examine the context for these escalating expressions of intimacy and labour. Given that the imaging communities of gendered mobile media reflect, contest and reinforce

‘imagined communities’ in the region, we need to re-evaluate how it has been shaped by the post 1997 economic crisis in which mobile media and gendered labour have played integral, interrelated roles.

### 1.3 Beyond “The New Rich”: Re-imagining the region

To a great extent, the predominance of consumerism has been exaggerated... to signal the rise of Asia’s “new rich” (Robison and Goodman 1996), not only in developed economies such as South Korea, where users can conduct banking, e-signature, and the purchase of small items based on the mobile phone (Lipp 2003), but also in less developed ones such as the Philippines, where the residents of Manila were reported to have experienced a “mobile mania”, especially using texting... Like the Filipinos, Chinese youngsters are most active in using such services as SMS owing to its faddish appeal and much lower price than voice telephony (Castells et al. 2007: 108).

Since the financial crisis of 1997, the emerging forms of production and consumption in the region have been unquestionably shaped by gendered modes of intimacy and labour. The

region’s various forms of mobility have been transformed since the economic crisis of 1997. Gendered mobile media can also be observed as a sum of imaging communities that proffer ways to re-imagine the region. Imaging communities, as aforementioned, deploy various forms of mobile media—visual, textual, aural and haptic—to reflect and redefine notion of identity, subjectivity and community. These micro processes and practices can provide insight into the region’s most evocative symbols for post-industrial consumption and production, the mobile phone. In turn, these imaging communities can be seen as micro politics that constitute the changing cartographies of the region’s imagined community within twenty-first post-industrial narratives.

Through imaging communities we gain access to the micro politics and tactics of the user in expressing, challenging and intervening in the region’s gendered modes of labour and intimacy under post-industrialism. In this section, I consider how new gendered imaging communities interrelate with the region’s ‘imagined community’ and how they provide fresh ways to understand the region’s dynamics. Through the micro-practices of imaging communities, we can begin to reconceptualise the region’s models of consumption and production within the twenty-first century.

Since 1997 new forms of gendered labour and inequality have emerged as the region moves swiftly into twenty-first century postmodernity. Indeed, the rise of UCC epitomised by mobile media

presents some curious questions for the future of creativity, labour and market value. This debate is undoubtedly anchored by gender. So how do gendered mobile media practices create new forms of imaging and re-imaging the region? Moreover, how do these micro, imaging communities of gendered mobile media reflect or challenge the macro, imagined communities in the region?

Mobile media—as both a material process of ‘imaging communities’ and as a poignant symbol for new forms of mobility—is pivotal in understanding the region after the economic crisis of 1997. Mobile media has been a site for both emphasising and contesting power inequalities, a repository for transcending new forms of class and subjectivities accompanying the uneven post-industrialism in the region. In particular, for women occupying predominantly lower classes, mobility usually took the form of geographic displacement as the Filipina worker abroad example exemplifies. In these various forms of arising empowerment and disempowerment, the symbolic and actual role of the mobile phone features prominently.

The notion of gendered performativity is particularly prevalent to the way in which the region’s post-industrialism has been conceptualised. For some, the region’s post-industrialisation can be seen as a form of hyperfemininity, whilst others see it as a tension between ‘hypermasculine’ structures for labour that exploit ‘hyperfeminine’ forms of labour. These forms of labour are precarious and often

unacknowledged within the market -- an obvious example is social and affective labour (social welfare). More often than not, these particular modes of labour are performed by women. As the region moves into the twenty-first century and takes a central force in the production of global ICTs, mobile media proffers new models for conceptualising the region and gendered labour.

L.H.M. Ling (1999) in ‘Sex Machine: Global Hypermasculinity and Images of the Asian Woman in Modernity,’ argues that hypermasculinity is not just the product of East Asia but rather of the global economy. For Ling, globalisation carries with it an association of ‘capital-intensive, upwardly mobile hypermasculinity’, as opposed to a localised and ‘socially regressive hyperfemininity’ (1999: 278). In this light the mobile phone is an ideal vehicle for housing the twins of global industrialisation -- hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity. For Thanh-Dam Truong (1999) the pivotal role of the female—as both consumer and producer—in the rise of industrialisation with the ‘Asian miracle’ of the region post 1997 cannot be underestimated.

As Truong observes, the rise of industrialisation is also the product of conflicts around gender, and specifically around the role of gendered classes and forms of labour. In ‘The underbelly of the tiger: gender and the demystification of the Asian miracle’, Truong provides a trenchant critique of the ‘Asian miracle’ (that is, the economic and technological rise of the Asian ‘tigers’ in the late



twentieth century) as not only a Western construction of otherness but also a formation that, in its construction of particular “Asian” values, serves to naturalise women with reproductive labour (1999: 133). Truong notes the rise of the ‘feminisation’ of industrial relations--in which women are the inevitable losers--highlights that the ‘Asian miracle’ is a ‘fully gendered process’ (1999: 158).

The Asian miracle of ANICs (Asian Newly Industrialised Countries), according to Truong, ‘is best understood through two structures of symbolic domination, i.e. west vs. east, and male vs. female’ (1999: 158). While this period saw the ‘west vs. east’ dichotomy disintegrate as East Asian countries gained economic and ideological power globally, the imbalance between male and female remained in force. This led Truong to note that while ‘the east-west battle for recognition may be won... the battle for social equality and cultural meaning of industrial progress may not be put to rest’ (1999: 159). In short, new models of post-industrial lifestyle practices in the region continue to harbour gender inequalities.

The shifts in mobile media practices and work / life paradigms are reflected by changes in the employment and education of women in the region. Whilst examples of female empowerment can be found in examples of mobile media UCC, gender inequalities, especially around labour, persist. According to the International Labour Office (ILO) ‘Global Employment Trends for Women’ report (2008), between 1997-2007 the Asia-

Pacific has been one of the dominant regions for growth in female employment. ‘[While] the adult employment-to-population ratio for women increased, the youth employment-to-population ratio decreased considerably by almost 5 percentage points to 40.3 per cent’ (2008: 15). This decrease in employment of young women is attributed to the increased number of women staying longer in education. Despite this trend, the region has the highest percentage of young women employed (higher than men) in the world. Indeed, a strong correlation can be made between the rise in creativity, female deployment of mobile media and growth in women’s education and employment. Education is key in the development of new forms of gendered labour, intimacy and mobility in the region.

Along with the increase in educated women, it is also predominantly women leading the move away from agriculture sectors and towards service (33.5%) and industry (25.5%) sectors. This shift of female labour markets mirrors the region’s retreat from agriculture and towards service and industry sectors -- epitomised by the growing role the region plays in manufacturing much of the global mobile technological hardware (mainland China being a case example) and ICT outsourcing. East Asia, in particular, demonstrates one the smallest gender gaps in the labour force with 79 women per 100 men participating in labour markets. From 1997 to 2007 the region’s rise of female employment runs concurrently to their deployment of

mobile media as a site for expression, creativity and intimacy.

As more women enter the workforce with higher educational qualifications, mobile media becomes a repository for emerging modes of mobility (economic and otherwise) across social, creative and affective forms of labour. The conspicuous image of female mobile media users is not just a sign of their newly found economic independence, but also an indicator of the significant role women workers have played in the industry as telephone operators and manufacturing workers. In Asia, women dominate mostly lower-skilled, low-value-added positions and, in particular, data processing (especially outsourced work) with only 20 percent of programmers (ILO 2008).

According to Nancy J. Hafkin (2003), the far from gender-neutral nature of ICTs is reflected in the gender ratio of employment in which women occupy certain lower tiered positions. Whilst women occupy half, if not more, of ICT jobs globally, it is predominantly within lower, and more precarious, forms of employment. As Harkin posits, 'the fact that women dominate the ranks of telephone operators and data entry personnel is not an indicator of gender equity in the telecommunication industry' (2003: 2). Unquestionably, the prominent role of women as active users (or producers) creates a tension with the history of female employment in menial positions in the ICT industry. This tension surrounding gendered mobile media, in turn, allows one to reconceptualise the

region's transformations around consumption and production.

Through imaging communities, we can consider how this produces a tension between, on the one hand, new emotional grammars of propinquity, intimacy, creative expression and female empowerment, and, on the other hand, the increasing exploitation and naturalisation of gendered reproductive and social labour. The former phenomenon can be seen in the arising forms of mobile media as creative industries such as the mobile phone novels (*keitai shōsetsu*) in Japan, whilst the latter is particularly prevalent in uneven post-industrial economies in which women from countries such as the Philippines become 'servants of globalization' (Parreñas 2001).

The region's emerging class and economic mobility since the economic crash of 1997, most recently noted in the case of China, has often been symbolised by the mobile phone. As one of the first by-products of the region's post-industrial mobility, economic mobility created new forms of mobile and immobile labour and lifestyle enclaves. These various forms of immobility and mobility contribute to contemporary 'cartographies of personalisation' of the region. One method for gauging these new post-industrial paradigms is via the micro processes of UCC and the types of 'imaging communities' they produce. From camera phone images to mobile novels, these imaging communities reflect localised forms of intimacy and labour. But how do these micro imaging

communities reproduce, or challenge, existing notions of Anderson's notion of 'imagined community'?

It is important to recognise that in Anderson's outlining of the region's various nation-states through the rise of distribution and printing techniques such as the printing press, a sense of belonging and place—an 'imagining' of community—has never involved just face-to-face interaction / communication (1983: 18) and always deployed some form of virtuality or co-presence. Mechanisms such as the printing press, railway systems and now, global mobile technologies, operate to instil notions of intimacy, home and cultural proximity. As new forms of global socio-technologies, mobile media could be this century's printing press; the very vehicle of modernity that Anderson discussed as integral in constructing what we define as nation-state today. In the case of print media, this reconfigured linguistic and geographic boundaries — and resulted in the decline of dialects and the vernacular. Far from eroding a sense of place and locality, mobile media reinforces the contingency of the local and the fleeting. Considering mobile media in this way extends Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' being constructed through media — from print media, to transnational Asian media in the form of Web 2.0 and mobile media.

In the case of mobile media and its unofficial, micro imaging communities we can see the rise of the vernacular and local — the politics of intimate labour, or what I call, 'mobile capital'. Like mobile

intimacy, mobile capital is the product of the burgeoning forms of social, creative and affective labour — exemplified by UCC imaging communities. Imaging communities facilitate new formations of community and collectivity as they also produce unofficial communities. An imagined community is a sum of both its official and unofficial, micro and macro depictions. With the rise in mobile media and Web 2.0, the discourse of the unofficial and micro is becoming increasingly important to the ways in which individuals and communities view themselves and other contexts. This has been clearly identified in the rhetoric surrounding the rise of the active user.

In Robison and Goodman's *The New Rich* (1996) it is the formation of new economic imperatives and 'lifestyles' that prefigure the region's new consumer identity. As *The New Rich* so aptly demonstrated, the region's newly found industrialisation came with new forms of consumer-driven identity and subjectivities, exemplified by the mobile phone. For Singaporean cultural theorist Chua Beng-Huat (2000), one way to understand the region's various arising modernities would be to chart the role of consumption after the economic crash of 1997. After the financial crisis, government and industry worked to reconstruct consumption as no longer a subsidiary of production or, more importantly, of Westernisation. Through the rise of Asian capital—both economic and cultural—the phenomenon Chua calls 'consuming Asia' (2000) has taken on new significance locally and globally.

This can be seen in the ways in which transnational communities of online gaming have taken on new phenomenological dimensions, reflecting emerging localities and allegiances.

Writing after the 1997 crisis, Chua identified the growing role of consumption in the region that can no longer be 'subsumed under the mantle of production' (2000: 3). Identifying government policies enforcing saving rather than expenditure (epitomised by Taiwan and Singapore), Chua argues that older generations saw much of the conspicuous and egregious consumption by youth cultures as a form of 'Westernisation'. However, after 1997, the region had to sublimate the "'traditional" morality of savings... in order to save capitalism in Asia' (Chua 2000: 11). In this repression of traditional ideas of morality, Chua argues that Japan again became a technological centre that symbolised well-made products; despite the antagonisms of some neighbouring countries towards Japan as a site for imperialism, the consumption of Japanese goods was deemed more favourable than the consumption of Western commodities. The consumption of J-pop has been just one phenomenon in many (more recently the Korean wave or *Hallyu*) that constitutes the transnational consumer communities of the Asia-Pacific in which 'Asian' products dominate. [10] These 'consumer communities' can also be seen as perpetually shaping imaging communities.

Through imaging communities that reflect the region's various modes of

mobility, we can re-imagine some of the official—but just as contested and polysemic—ways in which the region has been conceptualised. As a construct, the Asia-Pacific was initially a Euro-American invention. Under colonialism, there was little 'regionalism' within what we now understand as the Asia-Pacific; rather there were a series of bilateral ties to the metropolis. This was also true during the US hegemony of the region in the 1950s and 1960s. Today the region is an ever-evolving constellation of economic and political power distributions: a sum of contesting modernities that have distinct and yet transnational connections. The rapid economic growth in parts of the region (Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, and now China, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia) over the last two to three decades has led to increasing linkages among these nations in creating transnational networks.

Once a discursive geopolitical rubric coined by the US, the Asia-Pacific—as a site for contesting local identities and transnational flows of people, media, goods and capital—has come under radical revision and reconceptualisation. This has led theorists such as Robert Wilson and Arif Dirlik to utilise 'Asia/Pacific' as 'not just an ideological recuperated term' but an imagined geopolitical space that has a double reading as both 'situated yet ambivalent' (Wilson 2000: 567). In their anthology *Asia/Pacific as space of cultural production*, Wilson and Dirlik attempt to challenge the 'hegemonic Euro-American'



construction underpinning the Asia-Pacific to conceive of new ways of conceptualising regionalism. In particular, they use the configuration 'Asia/Pacific' to discuss the region as a space of cultural production, social migration and transnational innovation, whereby 'the slash would signify linkage yet difference' (1995: 6). Specifically, the diverse and perpetually changing interstitials constituting the Asia-Pacific have been repositioned as a contested space for multiple forms of identity.

Far from the 1970s widely held view of the region as a bloc of satellite NICs (such as Taiwan and South Korea) oscillating around the region's first industrial nation, Japan, we now see a profoundly different picture. Rather than resembling a rigid and highly figurative oil painting cascading with European motifs and colours, the new picture is of an endlessly moving video image in which multiple divergent identities appear and disappear. In this video vignette of postmodernity, in which borders are both eroded and redefined, and transnational flows echo paths well worn, the mobile phone becomes a symbol for locality and gestures of propinquity, labours of love and work, and the realities and fictions of modernity.

As the region's various localities have evolved and transformed, so too have the ways in which modernity in the region has been conceptualised. From the Confucius revivalisms of the late 1990s in search of 'Asian' values, which were criticised for homogenising diversity, self-Orientalisation and essentialism (which

still lingers), the region attempted to think beyond Western and Eurocentric tropes by way of 'alternative modernities'. As Dirlik (2005) trenchantly observes, in this search for identity and cultural modernity in an age of mobility and reformation of constructions of nation-state, it was important that the region not deny its own history of cultural imperialism and colonial conflicts.

For Arjun Appadurai (2000) locality and region are not fixed geographic boundaries, but rather, mutating and ever-evolving scapes in the disjunctive flows of global objects, media and people. As Appadurai vividly describes, often the analysis of regionality assumes 'a particular configuration of apparent stabilities for permanent associations between space, territory and cultural organisation' (2000: 7). Appadurai argues that the 'capability to imagine regions and worlds is now itself a globalised phenomenon' and that regions produce their 'own cartographies of the world' (2000: 7). These new cartographies are now, in an age of 'participatory media' (Jenkins 2006) such as mobile media, marked by the politics of personalisation.

In Appadurai's model, regionality would take the form of temporal, rather than geographic, clusters. This interrogation of regionality is exemplified in the arguments surrounding the Asia-Pacific, as witnessed in debates around the appropriate term to depict the dynamic and contesting spaces it claims to represent. One can find numerous examples such as 'Asia-Pacific', 'Asia-

Pacific region', 'Asia/Pacific', 'Asian Pacific' and 'Asia and the Pacific'. These multiple, 'imagined worlds' are formed, informed and transformed by shifting dynamics between imaging and imagined communities.

Giovanni Arrighi observes in his meticulous discussion of capitalism and modernity in *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994) that capitalism can be viewed as four cycles from Genoese mercantile capitalism, Dutch finance capitalism, British industrial capitalism and contemporary American capitalism. According to Arrighi, the fifth form of capitalism, synonymous with twenty-first century modernity, will undoubtedly be East Asian capitalism. This argument is furthered in his latest book, *Adam Smith in China: Lineages of the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (2007). In a subsequent essay about the rising power of East Asia globally, Arrighi notes that East Asia has become 'the most dynamic world player in world-scale processes of capital accumulation' (1998: 59). However Arrighi, like Dirlik (1999), argues that this form of industrialism and power is not nascent. Rather, it is the myopic visions of many Western models of history that seem only to grasp capitalism and industrialism as relatively new forms, neglecting to see that the domination of the 'West'—either in the form of the US and Europe—is part of a much larger process of modernity and mobility (Arrighi et al. 2003). Both Arrighi and Dirlik provide useful ways in which to understand modernity within the region — their arguments demonstrate the need to contextualise

and conceptualise mobile media in the region within these broader processes notions of capitalism beyond twentieth century paradigms.

Alternative terms and definitions have been proffered to describe or delimit the area posited as the Asia-Pacific in an attempt to acknowledge, or subsume, the hierarchies inherent within the region. Dirlik has proffered two terms, 'Asian Pacific' and 'Euro-American Pacific.' He suggests, 'the former refers not just to the region's location, but, more important, to its human constitution; the latter refers to another human component of the region (at least at present) and also to its invention as a regional structure' (1992: 64). As Dirlik asserts, '[an] emphasis on human activity shifts attention from physical area to the construction of geography through human interactions; it also underlines the historicity of the region's formations' (1993: 4).

Writing in a later period marked by Confucius revivalism, Dirlik (1999) argues that such an activity sought to naturalise cultural constructions and forge cultural proximity whilst ignoring the histories of violent power struggles and imperialisms within the region. He argues that in defining East Asian modernity, the region must not perpetuate problematic regional community 'tropes' such as 'East Asia' and 'Asia-Pacific', and that there is a need to incorporate complex, dynamic understandings of history along with pluralist notions of culture. As Dirlik trenchantly observed, Confucius

revivalism, in its attempts to counteract Eurocentric Orientalism, only served to produce reproductions of it (1999: 167).

Amid the search for 'Asian' values that can be witnessed in much of *Hallyu* (Korean wave) transnationalism, some of the pros and cons of the region's new-found economic and ideological power have been less discussed — in particular the link between the rise of industrialism in the region and the rise of gendered forms of labour and inequality. The very forms of binary power and inequalities for which the region has criticised the West, have been replicated. This has led many theorists to explore the role of gender and modernity as a way in which to expose the inequalities, both new and persistent, in the practice and politics of the region.

In the self-Orientalism exemplified by Confucian revivalism the prevalent role of representations of Asian women, as symbolic forms of Orientalism's 'hyperfemininity' (Khoo 2007) is undisputed. However, the role of technology—and particularly mobile technology—complicates this model of localised and transnational gendering of the region. The phenomenal rise of the region's new economic and ideological global power is accompanied by the perpetuation, if not exacerbation, of certain inequalities, notably those associated with the pivotal role of women in the rise of flexible, precarious labour (both paid and unpaid). The integral role of gender in the rise and repackaging of consumption and alternative modernities in the region cannot be underestimated.

This leads us to ask: Can mobile media's unofficial imaging communities transpire into the official systems of labour and market economy?

Imaging communities demonstrate unofficial forms of reterritorialisation that counteract the bounded territorialisation of 'imagined communities'. Imaging communities reflect the current localities that differ greatly from pre-1997 status of the region when Anderson was writing. Much of the research into mobile media in the region has recognised its pivotal role in the 'reterritorialisation' of place through the deployment of the personal and intimate. In an age of so-called 'democratic' media—such as the camera phone—and the rise of distribution systems such as social software, the everyday user can become a producer; an active producer of images to be consumed. So how does gender inform these emerging imaging communities?

As I have explored in four case studies (Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong and Melbourne) from 2000-2007, we can see some consistencies in modes of gender performativity — especially in terms of how and why gender informs the ways in which users take and share their images. However, in the case of the 'three S's' (sharing, storing and saving) identified by Ito and Okabe, we find sharp contrasts among locations despite the overall similarity in terms of banal subject matter. By focusing on one of the most convergent, divergent and contested regions, the Asia-Pacific, we can explore arising forms of subjectivity, creativity,

expression and labour informing mobile media.

Through gendered mobile media, I summarise some of the parallels and disjunctures from a predominantly user-driven perspective. The aim is to see these practices as part of broader processes of post-industrialism—cartographies of personalisation—in the region. Vis-à-vis the rubric of gendered customisation, we can investigate patterns of (social, creative and affective) labour and intimacy within the practices of localised imaging communities. These imaging communities will demonstrate how users' micro practices reflect and challenge new forms of labour and intimacy, thus connecting us to new ways of conceptualising the region in the twenty-first century.

I argue that mobile media practices reveal a broader process in which the region's cartographies of personalisation are shaped by increasing feminisation of socio-technologies. Whilst the feminisation of technology globally has been identified by theorists such as Fortunati (2009) and Wajcman et al. (2009), this dimension has different qualities within the region's emerging politics of personalisation. Whether deployed by a male or female user, we are witnessing new forms of intimacy and labour that both enunciate and renounce definitions of hyperfemininity. Within this phenomenon lies a bigger question: whether these micro imaging communities will indeed intervene to shape macro, post-industrialist imagined

communities. Indeed, these processes are particular to the Asia-Pacific — the conspicuous feminisation of customisation has a long history in the uptake of technologies in the region and is not comparable to the European models. Through the localised imaging communities we can gain insight into the emerging forms of mobile media and how they are shaping, and being shaped by, the burgeoning cartographies of personalisation in the region.



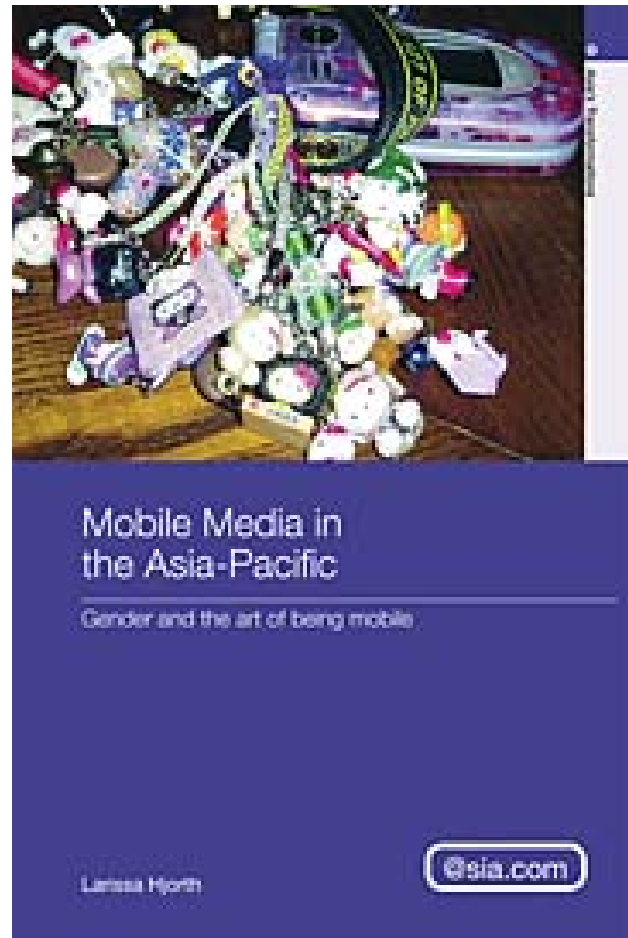
**10Above: *Three generations and remediations of personalised media (keitai version)*. (Larissa Hjorth 2004)**

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#### Notes

[1] The debate surrounding communities and networks amongst Internet researchers has a long history. See Ananda Mitra's redeployment of Anderson's imagined community in the context of the Internet in 'Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the

Internet' (1997). Extending upon Daniel Miller and Don Slater's groundbreaking ethnographic study of the Internet (2001), Maria Bakardjieva's insightful ethnographic examinations have utilised imagined community in the context of the Internet (2005).

[2] But things were not that simple, as was exemplified by the following year's economic crisis in the region. Consumption and modernity after the economic crisis of 1997 became a carefully orchestrated venture, with each 'nation' attempting governmental, industrial and socio-cultural revisions. In the decade following 1997, the region has grown unevenly, with socio-cultural, ideological, economic and technological changes marking the emergence of new forms of modernity. Cf. Chua (2000) on the distinctive patterns of the region's revitalised consumption.

[3] Just as the landline telephone, originally designated as a business tool for men was appropriated by women in the domestic sphere and transformed into a social medium, the mobile phone followed a similar trajectory. Unlike domestic landline telephones, which were fixed to the domestic sphere and thus reinforced gendered spatial division and reproductive (unpaid, domestic) labour, the mobile phone saw the 'domestic' going out into the public sphere, thereby partially breaking down the various gendered divisions of public / private, intimate / anonymous and paid / unpaid labour. In this disintegration of work / leisure distinctions, the mobile phone has often just amplified existing forms of

post-industrialism.

[4] In the same year, Wajcman's wonderfully rigorous critique of technology in *Feminism Confronts Technology* (1991) hallmarked the epoch's feminist re-examination of the socio-technological tropes of cyberspace and politics of virtuality. This era also saw the emergence of the concept of the 'feminisation' of technology / telephony (Brunner 2002) and debates around the gendered body politics of mobile virtuality (Fortunati cited in Wajcman & Haddon 2005). There are striking parallels and contrasts between, on the one hand, the rise of the 'feminisation of immigration' (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003) whereby most diasporic workers are women from developing countries (such as the Philippines and Vietnam) going to care for families in developed countries and, on the other hand, the financial and social mobility of women in those wealthier families in developed contexts. Both women have paid work that results in outsourcing their home caring to others.

[5] The linking between this socio-cultural phenomenon and its role in the rescripting of national culture has only been discussed in the case of discrete nationally-defined case studies such as in studies by Ito et al. (2005) and McVeigh (2004) in Japan, and Kim (2002, 2003) and Yoon (2003, 2006) in Korea.

[6] As aforementioned briefly, some of the earlier conferences in Korea by S.D. Kim (2003, 2004, 2005) such as *Mobile Communication and Social Change*

seemed to realign the West/East axis of reference outside the lens of Western precepts. However, the power balance remained largely unchanged, with most of the keynote speakers being Western males (Ling, Katz and Haddon)—apart from one female American Japanese (Ito)—and with a majority of the Asian scholars drawing from distinctively Eurocentric sociological models such as the work of Erving Goffman.

[7] Two such conferences, *Mobile Communication and Asian Modernities I* at City University in Hong Kong (organised by Angel Lin) and part II at Peking University in Beijing (organised by Peking University and France Telecom), attempted to scratch the surface of this emerging phenomenon.

[8] See Hjorth and Khoo (2007) [special issue](#) of *MC Journal* on the 'mobile' in the Asia-Pacific, 10(1). (accessed 10 March 2007).

[9] As Robert Luke (2006) identifies, if the *flâneur* epitomized modernism and the rise of nineteenth century urban, then the phoneur is the extension of this tradition as the icon of postmodernity. Perhaps, one could suggest that whilst the *flâneur* was a detracted gentleman stroller of the late nineteenth century, the phoneur is the female active participant within the twenty-first century. While Luke proffers a sobering model of postmodernity in the icon of the phoneur as a vehicle for m-commerce and surveillance, he neglects to acknowledge some of the ways in which UCC within participatory media models can operate

as a way of challenging the 'digital-citizen-as-consumer' rubric.

[10] The formation of the Asia-Pacific with Asian, rather than Euro-American, products has become part of everyday life. Pan-Asian cinema has become central to the region's communities; it has also become a source for a revisualisation of Hollywood's film industry, with multiple re-makes and odes to the significance of pan-Asian film globally. The recent remake of Hong Kong's *Internal Affairs* (directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2003) by Martin Scorsese (*The Departed* 2006) and Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2000) series are two of many examples.

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