Graduate Research Essay

A MOBILE PHONE OF ONE'S OWN:
JAPAN'S "GENERATION M"

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Early afternoon in Shibuya, a trendy entertainment district for Tokyo youth: commercials featuring Japanese television and pop stars hawking the latest mobile phones rain down from giant video screens. Bleached blond-haired youths hustle high-school girls for phone numbers. Groups of giggling teenagers sit on the pavement, school bags spread out around them, intently scrutinizing colourful hand-held screens and punching buttons with lightning speed. A cacophony of ring tones fills the air. Kitschy cartoon characters on phone straps dangle from pockets. The future is here, offering instant communication and gratification to a generation of young consumers used to nothing else. Thus, the mobile phone, or *keitai* ケイタイ as it is colloquially known in Japanese, embodies the pulse of youth culture in Japan.[2]

By drawing on personal observations, both as seen on the streets and through the lens of the Japanese media, including magazine articles and advertising campaigns, this paper will reveal the ways in which the mobile phone functions as an icon for the youth of contemporary Japan. The mobile phone invites analysis because of the increasingly conspicuous space it occupies on the urban landscape and the fact that it has, after all, become no ordinary communication tool. Distinctly Japanese innovations have made it a symbol of much that Japanese people value and desire. Furthermore, the phenomenon is reciprocal for, just as youth are re-appropriating the mobile phone and communication, the mobile phone is also redefining Japanese youth.

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valuable comments and encouragement.
[2] The formal word for mobile phone in Japanese is *keitai-denwa* 携帯電話 but this is often abbreviated to *keitai* ケイタイ and written using *katakana* rather than *kanji*.

Thus this paper will argue that the rise and transformation of the mobile phone from business tool to youth icon reveals more than a fascinating glimpse of Japanese popular culture; it also highlights major shifts in the fabric of Japanese society that can lead to a deeper understanding of its' youth.

Defining Icons

In the field of popular culture, "icon" takes on a meaning that goes beyond traditional religious imagery. Nor is an icon simply a popular artefact or figure; rather, it is someone, or something, that has a cultural significance which goes beyond any particular qualities that he, she or it might have. An icon is a visible, concrete embodiment of the myths, beliefs, and values that form a culture's mindset. In other words, "icons give tangible shape to invisible ideas" (Nachbar and Lause 1992:170-171). This is a useful description which gives rise to the question, what "invisible ideas" does the mobile phone embody in Japanese society?

Popular icons have also been interpreted as "meaningful objects which unite those who believe in the icon, express the important elements of the group's beliefs and values, and impart magical powers to the iconic group" (Nachbar and Lause 1992:171). Once again, one may ask what "magical powers" does the mobile phone impart? A mobile phone can be further defined as a *functional cultural icon,* belonging to the same group as cars, television, fast food chains and blue jeans, and as such has a meaning that goes beyond purely physical functions. To this list one might add the Japanese obsession with brand name goods: Japanese sales of Louis Vitton goods account for half of the fashion empire's global turnover, while Hermes raked up sales to the tune of 32.5 billion yen in 2000.[3] However, one is left to speculate on the cultural processes that were necessary in society for such a situation to come about. In *The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence,* Gavan McCormack astutely notes that "the agenda for the fifty postwar years – recovery, growth, and attainment of the status of an advanced country – had been clear and accomplished in full measure, but [by 1992] there was no consensus on how to formulate the agenda for the fifty that were to come, and there was a growing suspicion that the priorities of the past fifty might have been fundamentally ill chosen" (McCormack 1996: 3). The doubts expressed here are relevant to an analysis of the relationship between mobile phone technology and Japan's post-Bubble generation.

A Portrait of Japanese Youth

The mobile phone may mean different things to different groups: to a middle-

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[3] "Brand Fever Bucks Recession," *Journal of Japanese Trade and Industry* (Sep/Oct 2001), http://www.jef.or.jp.

aged Japanese *sarariiman* サラリーマン or white-collar worker, it may be a tool for facilitating meetings on the move; to a housewife, it may function as a way of keeping tabs on the whereabouts of her husband or children; or to an elderly person, it may represent an unknown and unknowable world. This paper pays particular attention to how the youth of Japan consume the mobile phone, and shows how the development of the mobile phone itself reveals specifically Japanese traits. Here "Japanese youth" refers broadly to people in their teens and twenties, a common grouping in surveys such as those by the Dentsu Research Institute. "Youth," of course, can also include pre-teens, a group which is a growing consumer force in Japan. It is not uncommon to see elementary school students with mobile phone in hand but, as their parents often purchase these for safety reasons, pre-teens are not included here.

The youth referred to in this paper are that infamous nomadic generation that has come, or is coming, of age in a Japan weakened by a decade-old recession. In contrast to their parents, who worked single-mindedly during the period of high economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s to lift Japan to the level of economic super power, this group enjoys a life of relative luxury, wanting for nothing but left to question what they should be working for. McCormack's observation that "three or four hours daily commuting to work, a couple of rooms in a high-rise apartment, in an environment saturated with images of affluence that mock their reality, is the common expectation" is not far off the mark (McCormack 1996: 79).

The post-bubble generation is the topic of much media speculation, creations born to and of a post-modern world in which parental figures lack authority. During the post-war period of high economic growth, children became alienated from their fathers, who were presented to the Western world as modern day samurai warriors, putting company before family, even to the point of death (the term *karoushi* 過労死 or "death from overwork" was coined to describe this phenomenon). In other words, fathers were defined by their *absence* and communication was conducted through the mother. Redundancies and pay cuts in the last decade have meant that some fathers have more time to spend at home and, while one might argue that this equates to more time with the family, it seems that, ironically, many children have lost touch with, and respect for, their weakened fathers.

According to Odaka Naoko 小高尚子 of the Dentsu Research Institute, the post-bubble generation displays a strong tendency to stick within the boundaries of their own territory, and not worry about what goes on outside their own realm.[4] Of course, it can be argued that Japanese culture as a whole displays a tendency to delineate boundaries, a theory embodied by the dyadic concepts of *soto* 外 and *uchi* 内 (outside and inside). The contrast between these states is illustrated in human relationships, where *soto no hito* 外の人 becomes "outsider" and *uchi no hito* 内の人 becomes "insider" (Doi 1986: 23). Thus, the word for "foreigner," *gaijin* 外人, literally means "outside

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[4] *Kikaretekomaru to "wakarimasen" zoku* 「聞かれて困ると『わかりません』族」 *AERA* (April 1 2002):40-42. AERA stands for *Asahi Shimbun* Extra Report and Analysis. This magazine touts itself as a Japanese version of *Time*.

person." The recent proliferation of young people using the word *wakarimasen* わかりません ("I don't know") to avoid answering questions is seen by Odaka as an extension of this boundary keeping. In other words, it is used to switch communication "on" and "off." This is a particularly pertinent metaphor for analyzing the way in which the mobile phone is consumed.

Japanese youth are criticized for their "indifference" to those around them (exemplified by girls "shamelessly" applying makeup in the train, boys squatting on carriage floors, and both genders jabbering loudly on their mobile phones) and for their "lack of morals" (public displays of affection and *enjo-kousai* 援助交際, the practice of high-school girls selling their time, and sometimes bodies, to willing businessmen). Admittedly, many of these claims seem to be representative of the age-old generation gap but the media has seized upon them as symbols of the disintegration of so-called "traditional Japanese values," such as respect for one's elders. This generation seems to be fascinated by anything that promises "individuality" or *kosei* 個性. The obsession with brand name goods illustrates this trend clearly. In *Yutakasa no seishin byouri* 『豊かさの精神病理』 (*The Psychopathology of Abundance*), psychologist Ohira Ken 大平建 writes of the tendency in a number of his patients to try to establish their own identity through consuming brand name goods. Such patients were at a loss when asked to describe their own or other people's personalities but were able to list in great detail the brand name goods they or those around them owned. They frequently associated their conspicuous consumption with the words "individuality" and "policy" (Ohira 1990: 8-9 & 215).

The post-bubble generation is caught between two worlds, as the model of group harmony long held as the foundation of post-War economic success does not seem to be enough for them. The idea of Japan as a society based on group harmony, refined in the *Nihonjinron* 日本人論 debates of the 1970s, was made famous by Nakane Chie 中根千枝 (*Japanese Society)* and Doi Takeo 土居健郎(*The Anatomy of Dependence*). Nakane defined Japan as a "vertical society" whereby people prefer to act within a framework of a group, with a hierarchical organization. However, it should be remembered that one theory cannot possibly accurately describe all Japanese patterns of thought and behaviour.

A further defining feature of Japanese youth culture is that of the *furiitaa* フリーター. This newly coined word combines the English word "free" with the German word "arbeiter" (meaning "worker"). In Japanese, the German-derived word *arubaito* アルバイト is used to denote a part-time job. Essentially, a *furiitaa* is someone who has finished their education and, wishing to avoid riding the "one company for life" train, opts instead to work different jobs (flipping burgers or ringing tills), quitting when they tire of the job, with no lingering guilt. They often use their money to finance trips overseas or pursue hobbies. This trend not only reflects the difficulty of finding secure employment amidst the worsening Japanese economy; it can also be read as a sign of the desire of young Japanese to lead a life different

from that of their parents, and as a symbol of their disillusionment with the direction of modern day Japanese society. *Furiitaa*, and Japanese youth in general, have a relatively high disposable income due to the fact that many continue to live with their parents until marriage, thus lessening the burden of supporting themselves financially and emotionally (the term *parasaito singuru* パラサイト・シングル or "parasite single" has sprung up to describe their draining existence). Japanese advertisers cater to the perceived demands of this huge market: Japan is literally a shopper's paradise with an endless array of goods to choose from, especially in the field of the electronic media, which of course, includes mobile phones.

A Brief History of the Mobile Phone

Since the invention of the telephone over a century ago, communication has undergone astounding changes. Historians have noted the profound impact the telephone has had on society, from the way it altered seemingly inflexible concepts of space and time to less obvious aspects such as the role telecommunications played in urban sprawl and mass migration to the suburbs (Pole 1977). The first commercial cellular telephone system began operation in Tokyo in 1979 but it took a number of years for the cumbersome television-sized sets to reach the streamlined and lightweight creations of today. The market took off in earnest in 1994 after cell phones, previously available on a rental-only basis, began to be offered for sale. By 1996, companies eager to bring more customers on board began to waive sign-up fees and offer set-up packages for next to nothing. Originally meant as a business tool, falling prices meant that the mobile phone became easily accessible to all. It represented a break with the restrictions of being bound to the telephone, in the same way as the cordless telephone represented freedom in the 1980s (Patton 194). Furthermore, a major difference between the home telephone and the mobile phone is that the latter was the first to be equipped with a screen to display the caller's number, thus leaving it up to the individual to decide whether or not they want to "pick up." The mobile phone has also changed the way that people meet: whereas before they had to make specific references to time and place, now things can be left open-ended.

The number of subscribers to mobile phone services rose rapidly in Japan in the 1990s and as of December 2000, 77% of Japan's population of approximately 127 million people owned a mobile phone.[5] The *Nikkei Shimbun* reported the results of a July 2002 government survey in which 80% of respondents in their teens and twenties answered that they own a mobile phone and an astounding 96% of girls aged between 18-22 have a mobile phone or PHS.[6] Japan has four major providers: the NTT DoCoMo Group

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[5] Reported in *Newsweek* (Japan edition, July 11 2001): 29.

[6] PHS stands for Personal Handyphone System and is a variation of a mobile phone but with a much smaller receiving range. They were most popular in the mid-1990s, when mobile phone call rates were still prohibitively expensive, but have lost favour now that

which as of March 31ˢᵗ 2001 occupied 59.1% of the market, the KDDI Group (18.0%), the J-Phone Group (16.4%) and the Tu-Ka Group (6.5%) (*The Asahi Shimbun Japan Almanac 2002*: 7).   NTT DoCoMo's i-mode service represented a breakthrough in 1999 by pioneering the first mobile internet service: subscribership to i-mode topped the twenty million mark in April 2001, with about 50 percent of customers being in their teens and twenties (*Time*, June 4 2001, inside cover).   Users can access thousands of sites and use specialized services that range from e-mail and online shopping to ticket reservations and bank transactions. This so-called "m-commerce" (the "m" standing for both "mobile" and "money") has been heralded as the saviour of the Japanese economy, with Japan accounting for 390 million yen of the 430 million yen worldwide m-commerce market in 2001.[7]   Recent developments include a mobile television screen which allows callers to view each other when speaking, and trials are being conducted in which the mobile phone acts as a debit card, allowing the user to buy train tickets and drinks from vending machines.

Phone as Fashion

Mobile telephone design in Japan, which includes shape, colour and size, almost defies description. Fashions change quicker than you can say "Hello Kitty"; add to this the fact that Japan is famous for being a "throwaway culture" (*tsukaisute-bunka* 使い捨て文化), meaning that functional items that no longer make the grade are disposed of, rather than recycled or repaired. In accordance with this spirit, the range of mobile phones available is mind-boggling. The latest model may cost anywhere from 15,000 to 30,000 yen (US$200-$350) but a model released a few months earlier can be picked up for literally next to nothing. (Such affordability is no doubt another reason why mobile phones have spread so quickly amongst youth).   Size and lightness are also defining features. Of the twelve phones featured in Tu-Ka's April 2002 brochure, individual weights ranged from a feather-light 72 to 112 grams. Such compactness brings to mind stereotypes of Japan as a culture that excels at miniaturization. In *The Compact Culture,* O-Young Lee argues that "compactness" or "packing in" is a unique feature of Japanese culture. Examples of this propensity for smallness include the folding fan (a Japanese invention), which is described as "portable art" and "picture scrolls, which can readily be rolled up and carried" (Lee 1994: 37). Lee reveals the tendency in Japanese culture to "fold up" objects, including the *fusuma* 襖 (a sliding paper-covered door on a wooden frame), paper lanterns and umbrellas. To this list we may add the *futatsu-ori* 二つ折り or "fold-up" mobile phone.

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mobile phones can be purchased and used so cheaply. *Wakamono no hachiwari ga keitaidenwa ya PHS hoyuu* 「若者の 8 割が携帯電話や PHS 保有」 *Nikkei Shimbun,* (July 24 2002), http://www.nikkei.co.jp.
[7] *M-komaasu ga nihon o sukuu* 「ｍコマースが日本を救う」 *AERA* (March 12 2002): 12-14.

Mobile phone accessories are big business: the possibilities are endless for making the mobile phone into a personal high-tech communication hub, in much the same way as one would decorate an office at work with photos and knick-knacks. Firstly, there is the strap, of which there are hundreds of types, many taking the form of characters from popular culture, from Hello Kitty to Harry Potter. Trends can be gauged from sales figures: a strap featuring Koizumi Junichiro 小泉純一郎, Japan's lion-haired rock-star status Prime Minister, sold phenomenally in the summer of 2001; however, sales soon dropped off, reflecting his flagging support. Brand name straps are popular among fashion-conscious young women, as are hand-made bead creations. Younger girls may opt for soft toy straps, some of which are bigger than the phone itself.

Phones can be further personalized by covering the surface with *purikura* プリクラ (print club) photo seals or by sliding on a new cover to match the user's clothing for that particular day, an aspect discussed in further detail later. For a small monthly service fee, the latest chart hits can be downloaded and used as ring tones (*chaku-mero* 着メロ an abbreviation of *chakushin-merodii* 着信メロディー), thus offering the user the opportunity to create their own soundscape in much the same way as a personal stereo. Another success story has been the downloading of cute cartoon character screen savers, which change from month to month. Mobile phones have evolved beyond simple tools for talking: J-Phone was the first to offer the *sha-meeru* 写メール service ("sha" coming from *shashin* 写真, the word for photograph), which combines the functions of phone and digital camera in one, allowing the user to take pictures with the phone and send them to friends.

What do these trends reveal about Japanese youth culture? Firstly, one can glean that fashions change quickly and newer is better. Of course, this is what the tastemakers want the consumer to believe, as advertising fills a gap for something that is not necessary: "the problem isn't to *invent* a machine, but to get us all to *adopt* it, to feel we need it" (Myerson 2001: 7). Secondly, one may conclude that the mobile phone symbolizes certain values appreciated in Japanese society, such as miniaturization and multi-functioning technology: why have just a mobile phone when it can double as a digital camera, or provide access to the Internet all at the touch of a button? Perhaps most importantly, one can say that the mobile phone offers a way to assert the user's personality through tailoring it to express personal tastes. This aspect, and the extent to which the mobile phone has taken hold of the Japanese psyche, can be seen in a 2001 article from the magazine *Chou Chou* (No. 25: 78-83), a fortnightly publication which targets women in their twenties and serves up a mixture of shopping, gourmet and media–related information.

Mobile Phones and Personality Types

The *Chou Chou* article divides phone models into four categories ("flipper," "fold-up," "straight" and "special") and analyses relationship patterns and the

level of preoccupation with marriage according to the model. It is well known that Japanese women's magazines display a tendency to classify personality types (Miller 1997). Indeed, Japanese society has many ways of classifying and analyzing people, from Western and Chinese horoscopes to blood (*ketsuekigata-uranai* 血液型占い) and animal types (*doubutsu-uranai* 動物占い). In a feature entitled "Revealed by Your Mobile Phone: Everyone's Personality and Love Philosophy," a doctor of psychology and a marketing expert are consulted to analyze personalities depending on phone design and how the user accessorizes it. This article sports the sub-heading: "The mobile phone has become an indispensable item in daily life. So it is not surprising that your individuality and habits are there for all to see by looking at the way you use your phone. Isn't it just too scary to think that the inner depths of your soul are on show for all?" Although this kind of two-cent psychology is no doubt dispensed for entertainment purposes, I use the article here to show how the mobile phone, despite being a mere object, has taken on iconic proportions by acquiring a cultural meaning.

First, the user of a "flipper" (*furippaa* フリッパー) type is described as indecisive and slightly conservative but excelling at obeying her boyfriend. She is told that with gentleness as her weapon, she will dash headlong down the path that leads to being a "good wife and wise mother."[8] Someone who uses a "fold-up" (*futatsuori*) model will progress from the dramatic power-play kind of romance to a settled marriage. She ably performs both the "can-do woman" and the "good-girl" role. The user of a "straight" (*sutoreeto* ストレート) type is rational with firm beliefs but chooses "losers" on purpose and falls into the trap of supporting her boyfriend, a role she will continue to perform in marriage. Finally, the last type is categorized as "special," (*tokushu* 特殊) in other words, models which fall outside of the other three categories. The girl who uses this kind of mobile phone has almost no luck in love but to everyone's surprise may marry into a wealthy family. She is seen as strange by others but wants to assert her individuality. This analysis is followed by a section about what ring tones reveal, as well as observations such as "those who update their mobile phone model regularly are more likely to cheat on their partner because they like new things."

The next section of the *Chou Chou* article analyzes mailing habits. It claims that, depending on "mail style" (such as the number of times the user checks their mailbox and their number of e-mail friends or *meeru-tomo* メール友), relationship patterns are revealed. For example, someone who has over thirty *meeru-tomo* is in fact very lonely. Someone who replies to mails almost instantly is the sacrificing type always trying to please others. Someone who checks their mail as soon as they get on the train and continues to do so throughout the journey has "mobile phone dependency" and also more than likely suffers from "co-dependency" in love relationships. And someone who

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[8] The word used here is *ryousai-kenbo* 良妻賢母, a term that was especially popular during the Meiji period to advocate the ideal role for women as being a "good wife and wise mother." It says something about the nature of Japanese society that this word is still being used in the 21st century, *and* in a magazine for young women.

does not delete e-mails but instead reads them over and over again (particularly if it is from someone they like) is the "stalker" type.

Straps are divided into types: the "jingle-janglers," those who attach many straps, are slow to catch on to trends; those who have one strap but change it regularly are always worrying about what others think of them and get sick of things easily so they need a man with a "heart as wide as an ocean." Male choice of mobile phones is also analyzed, as is mobile phone compatibility.

In this way, the mobile phone has gone beyond being a mere object for communicating messages: it is akin to a part of the body that can reveal as much about you as your horoscope. When this researcher recently asked some Japanese students to sum up what their mobile phone means to them, a common answer was *karada no ichibu* 身体の一部 or "a part of my body." Still others responded with "my best assistant." In this way, it is easy to see how such analyses appeal to youth. The mobile phone offers another way to express "individuality" which, as I have pointed out, is a prime commodity amongst the post-bubble generation.

From "Talk" to "Communication"

One popular use of mobile phones by youth in Japan is e-mailing. This phenomenon is not unrelated to the "pocket bell" boom amongst schoolgirls in the early 1990s. Pocket bells (or pagers as they are more commonly known in the West) were originally not targeted at youth but they caught on as teenagers appropriated them to text-encoded messages to friends. The pager market reached its peak in June 1996 at 10.77 million subscribers but had crashed to 2.05 million by March 2000, as mobile phones offered more comprehensive e-mailing services (*Information and Communications in Japan* 2001: 77). E-mailing accounts for a large proportion of mobile phone use and this trend has been criticized for changing methods of communication by discouraging the human element of actual face-to-face "talk." Step onto any train carriage in Tokyo and take note of how many people are slumped in their seats with heads bent forward, furiously punching buttons and sending e-mails: this is the *oyayubi-bunka* 親指文化 or "thumb culture." This phenomenon raises the question: can we not see e-mailing on the train as a way of escaping eye contact with fellow passengers, as a way of entering into one's own world in much the same way as the Walkman was used in the 1980s? Of course, it can be argued that books offer a similar escape but, with the current trend of *katsuji-banare* 活字離れ (a moving away from print culture), people are reading traditional texts less and less, and cell phone Internet and e-mail usage are filling that gap as they require less concentration.

In a crowded train, it certainly may be more pleasant to look at your phone screen than to have to deal with the stranger standing in your face/space. A *Newsweek Japan* 2001 article reports on a study of mobile phone use in trains conducted by a group at Tokyo's Keio University,

whereby staff were sent onto near empty trains to sit directly next to passengers. It was found that the vast majority of passengers immediately showed signs of discomfort and started checking their e-mail. Professor Hama Hideo 浜秀夫 terms this phenomenon "courteous indifference" (*gireiteki-mukanshin* 儀礼的無関心).[9] In other words, e-mailing on the train is a way of being conscious of other people while feigning indifference in case a problem arises.

However, e-mailing is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. In *Wakamono no Hosoku* 『若者の法則』 (*The Rules of Young People*), Kayama Rika 香山リカ argues that mobile phone e-mailing has caught on amongst youth because they want concrete evidence of communication – voices and expressions disappear in an instant but remain forever on a LCD screen (Kayama 2002: 86). Kayama theorizes that by streamlining one's thoughts into a set number of characters, only the most important things are being "said," and this is an example of the more direct and frank way of communication favoured by the young generation. Unlike paper communication (faxes and letters), they can carry around all their important messages with them, re-reading them at leisure. Kayama calls this *katachi aru komyunikeeshon* 形あるコミュニケーション or "communication with shape" (Ibid).

Public and Private Space: Friendship Patterns

Mobile phone use and e-mailing in public raises issues of public and private space, and in this respect the mobile phone can be compared to the Walkman. As Iain Chambers notes in his study of the Walkman, what was usually a private activity (i.e. listening to music in one's room or a space especially designated for that purpose such as a club) encroached on the public sphere, as music could be listened to in the park, in the library or on the train. He argues that the significance of the Walkman "lies in its deliberate confusion of earlier boundaries, in its provocative appearance out of place" (quoted in du Gay 1997: 115). The Walkman raised fears that, by bringing a private act into the public sphere, society would break down, allowing individuals to "switch off" and remove themselves from active participation in society. However, Chambers views Walkman usage in a more positive light, in that it encourages us to approach the concepts of time and space differently (du Gay 1997: 142). In other words, by listening to music in an untraditional context, the user is actually participating in the rewriting of conditions of representation.

How can we interpret the mobile phone in terms of this argument? In the same way, talking on the telephone and e-mailing are primarily private acts, but it has become common to hear people discussing private business on their mobile phones in public places like trains, an action which blurs the boundaries

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[9] *Oyayubibunka no ajiateki shouuchuu* 「親指文化のアジア的小宇宙」 *Newsweek* (Japanese language edition, July 11 2001): 28-29.

between public and private. The fear that the Walkman would result in people "switching off" from society is echoed in criticisms of the mobile phone now: that is, individuals become so absorbed by their phone screens that they are oblivious to what is going on around them. Another similarity with the Walkman is that a mobile phone allows the user to impose a personal soundscape on the surrounding environment, not only through speech but also through ring tones. In fact, it is the creation of this "noise" that been used in arguments to criticize young people for their lack of consideration towards others.

The concept of space is particularly important when examining the rise of the mobile phone not only in Japan but also in other Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Korea. *Newsweek* (Japanese edition, July 11 2001) suggests that the reason behind the phenomenal spread of mobile phones amongst Asian youth in comparison to their American and West European counterparts is that it is hard for people living in densely populated cities to create their own personal space and so the mobile phone functions as a substitute for private space. Thus, even if you are unable to invite your friends over to your cramped apartment, you can share time together through the mobile phone (*Newsweek,* 29). This comment not only hints at how the mobile phone is inherently related to issues of space; it also raises important questions as to what, if any, effect it has on the friendship patterns of Japanese youth.

Mobile phones have in fact been used to argue that Japanese youth have many friends but that those friendships are superficial. For example, popularity can be measured by the number of names registered in the phone book of the *keitai*. Often these friendships are restricted to the virtual level, whereby people who may never meet will mail each other on their cell phones and reveal intimate details. This has given rise to words like *meeru-tomo* (e-mail friend), from the Japanese word for "mail" and *tomodachi* (友達 friend) and *meeru-kano* メールカノ (e-mail girlfriend), which truncates the word for girlfriend (*kanojo* 彼女). Some people even prefer such friendships, as they can create and maintain a persona that may be different to how they are in real life. Mobile phones have been blamed for causing less face-to-face contact but, as Matsuda Misa 松田美佐 notes, mobile phone use has not caused any decrease in the frequency with which friends meet in person. In a survey of university students, over 50% answered that their relationships with friends who owned a mobile phone had actually strengthened, while 50% responded that it was easier to lose contact with friends who did not own a mobile phone. Matsuda argues that the mobile phone signals selective and narrow friendships, rather than "wide and shallow" ones as some critics claim (Matsuda 2000: 116). In other words, the mobile phone is an indispensable item for maintaining friendships.

Selling Dreams: Promoting the Mobile Phone

An analysis of the ways in which the mobile phone is promoted also provides clues as to its meaning. There is no doubt that the global mobile phone campaign claims to be redefining what it means for human beings to communicate (Myerson 2001: 5). In Japan, celebrity endorsement of mobile phones seems to promise youth more than mere "communication." As with most items targeted at youth in Japan, the four major mobile service providers, DoCoMo, J-Phone, Tu-Ka and KDDI, employ celebrities to endorse their products. As has been noted, advertising is both an economic as well as a cultural practice because, in order to sell the product, it must first appeal; "and in order to appeal, it must engage with the *meanings* which the product has accumulated and it must try to construct an *identification* between us – the consumers – and those meanings" (du Gay 1997: 25). How are meanings constructed for mobile phones and how is identification made between the product and the consumer in Japan? I would like to analyse three advertising campaigns in order to answer these questions.

Firstly, NTT DoCoMo's most recent television advertising campaign, which ran from January until July of 2002, provides a fascinating example of how the mobile phone has been re-appropriated. The campaign, entitled *keitai-kazoku-monogatari* ケイタイ家族物語 ("The Tale of a Mobile Phone Family"), takes the form of short slice-of-life scenes of one family, much like a soap opera. Popular Japanese actor Tamura Masakazu 田村正和 plays the father and other stars such as Suzuki Kyoka 鈴木京香 and Kato Ai 加藤愛 play the respective daughters. This family is the quintessential post-modern family, characterized by everyone living apart. The epilogue which frames this campaign is *hitori de itemo, kazoku to iru koto* 一人でいても、家族といること ("even when you are alone, you are with your family"). The key phrase is *watashitachi wa tsunagatte-iru; mienai mono de tsunagatte-iru* 私たちはつながっている。見えないものでつながっている – "We are all connected, connected by something invisible." Of course, such a phrase plays on the ambiguity of the word *mono* (物 thing) – it can refer to both the invisible bonds which tie family together *and* the invisible mobile phone network. Even grandpa makes an appearance in NTT's campaign, using the video screen on his mobile phone to view his grandchildren in the manner of a live broadcast. Such a marketing strategy employs the old-fashioned idea of an extended family (with Tamura playing a traditional and grumpy – but respected – father figure from bygone days, the kind of symbol seen as lacking in modern Japanese families) and recontextualizes it within the framework of the wonders of technology. Thus the mobile phone acquires a meaning far greater than that of a simple communication tool.

In fact, the mobile phone is not only changing how people communicate with one another, but also how youth communicate with family. Kayama Rika notes the recent trend of young people who fail to return home for days or weeks, called *puchi-iede* プチ家出 (literally a "mini house-leaving"), and instead stay at friend's houses or sing the night away in cheap

karaoke boxes.   Apparently parents do not worry excessively about their absent children because they can contact them anytime on their mobile phone. Although one could argue that the mobile phone may in fact lead to *increased* contact between parents and children, Kayama claims that the instant contact gives parents a false sense of reassurance and that "children" no longer feel the necessity of being together with "family," or gathering under the same roof to live.   Furthermore, many young people choose to use their mobile phones in their own room, leading to less shared space with their family.[10] This leads to speculation that the very meaning of "family" might change (Kayama 2002: 88-91).

　　Tu-Ka's campaign focuses on one celebrity: Hamazaki Ayumi 浜崎あゆみ, a 23-year old musical diva from Kyushu, who reigns at the top of the Japanese Pop (J-Pop) hit parade.   More than a mere singer, "Ayu" as she is affectionately known, has become a product and an icon of Japanese youth. Her Bambi-like eyes and syrupy lyrics, which tell of loneliness and isolation, seem to speak directly to the hearts of Japanese youth.[11]   She is the supreme taste-maker amongst youth, voted "Best Jeanist," "Best Eye Dresser" (for sunglasses) and "Nail Queen 2001," while her clothes and make-up are copied religiously by her followers (mostly high school age girls).   In the December 2001 catalogue for Tu-Ka, advertisers have skilfully drawn together these elements of Ayu's popularity to promote their product: note her elaborate nails and trendy sunglasses, as well as the fur on her collar, which are all symbols of Hamazaki's position as fashion leader.   She is standing in the middle of a road, wide and empty with the implication that it stretches on for miles.   She seems to be talking on her mobile phone, implying that even in the middle of nowhere, she is in touch with what is happening.   She seems strong and independent but is connected to the rest of the world by her mobile phone – this is emphasized by Tu-Ka's English catchphrase, "Link your style," implying that the product is a direct expression and reflection of the user's personal style and fashion, as well as a link to the rest of the world.

　　Finally, KDDI uses a popular actor, Nagase Masatoshi 永瀬正敏, as its main image character for its mobile phone service called "au".   The English slogan "Designing the Future" embodies KDDI's aim to stand at the forefront of technology.   This slogan has the additional by-line, written in *romaji* (Anglicized Japanese): *surougan mo daijidakeredo, jikkosurunoga ichiban daiji* ("Slogans are also important but action is the most important," or "actions speak louder than words").   In addition to "Designing the Future," another key phrase in the au marketing campaign is the English phrase "Choose Your Style," used in 2002 pamphlets promoting the cdmaOne line. The main idea behind this brochure is to "dress up your mobile phone" by changing the cover to suit the user's clothes.   The word *kisekae-keitai* 着せ替

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[10] According to a 1999 survey by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, 42.1% of 15-19 year olds and 44.6% of those in their 20s use their mobile phone in "their own room." Reported in Misa Matsuda 2000: 111-122.

[11] See *Time* (Asia edition, March 25 2002) for an in-depth examination of Hamazaki's place in Japan's idol factory.

えケイタイ is used, roughly meaning to "change clothes"; in this case, the clothes being the *keitai* cover. The phone comes with three interchangeable panels, named "elegant," "modern" and "casual," in exactly the same terms as are used to describe clothing. It is obvious that the mobile phone is an accessory, and a way for young people to display fashion sense. What was originally a tool for communication between two people has evolved into a way of expressing personal taste and individuality. However, all these campaigns seem to be emphasizing the perceived necessity of having a mobile phone to join the future, as well as it being a necessary tool for self-expression.

Conclusions

In a 2001 survey of Japanese attitudes, one can see some of the misgivings that dominate Japanese culture. Respondents were asked to select a word that best describes the era from a list. The results were as follows: confusion 30%; selfishness 17%; unfairness 12%; acceptance of responsibility 11%; change 7%; collapse 6%; stability 6%; freedom 5%; others 6% (*The Asahi Shimbun Japan Almanac 2002*: 9). Amidst this confusion, the widespread use of mobile phones by Japanese youth looms as a powerful metaphor. It offers a sense of shared environment in that access to information channels is available to all; perhaps it can be said that these huge networks represent globalization in a Japanese context.

In the 21st century, it is obvious that mobile phones are becoming an indispensable part of the lives of people all over the globe, and as this century further progresses, the phenomenon of Japanese *keitai* culture may become universally applicable.[12] Just as the world was stunned by the compactness of Sony's Walkman twenty years ago, Japan's technological giants have streamlined and downsized the mobile phone, while youth have refined it into, to recontextualize Lee's phrase, "portable art." Japanese youth were quick to rewrite the mobile phone narrative, reappropriating what was originally a business tool and repositioning it as a fashion item and cultural icon. Advertising campaigns encourage this generation to "link your style" (Tu-Ka) or "find your style" (KDDI) using their mobile phones. This generation change the cover of their mobile phone to match their clothes; they add straps and stickers and download sophisticated ring tones all in an effort to assert their individuality.

If one delves beneath the appearance of this icon, one can also see the infiltration of the mobile phone on a deeper level. Japan's Generation M – the mobile and monied who have taken over the reigns from the indefinable Generation X – use their mobile phones in a way which is redefining communication. As NTT DoCoMo's television campaign demonstrates, *keitai* become check-in points for getting in touch with family, so that we are left to question the very meaning of "family." Furthermore, this generation, used to their own private phone which allows them the freedom (thanks to caller display) to choose whom they wish to talk to, are rewriting friendship patterns, giving rise to words such as *meeru-tomo*. Although one may wonder if friendship can be measured by the number of names in a phone book that can be erased at the push of a button, this kind of communication may indeed reflect selectiveness, rather than superficiality.

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[12] It seems that "texting" is popular amongst youth globally: according to a recent article in the *Otago Daily Times* ("Text Message Key to Future," July 31 2002), British researchers surveyed 1000 mobile phone users for the shop chain Woolworths and found that the average 16 year old sends up to ten text messages a day. Furthermore, the article reports on a study in which researchers examined how different professions wrote text messages and divided them into four groups – creatives, jugglers, controllers and facilitators. They claim that this kind of research can help them guess the future career possibilities of teenagers.

Through e-mail, youth can rewrite their own narratives *wherever* and *whenever* they want, thus freeing them from more traditional boundaries of time and space. Their community of friends is endless and literally at their fingertips. Thus, the mobile phone is an icon for Japanese youth precisely because it is seen to embody the qualities that they need to function in their world: a way to assert their individuality and the ability to communicate on terms of their own design. Goodbye Generation X: Generation M is on the move.

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