

**Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe and Misa Matsuda (eds.),
*Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones
in Japanese Life***

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005

**Japanese Version: Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe and Misa
Matsuda (eds.), *The Landscape of Keitai:
The Routinization of Technology* ケータイのある風景—
テクノロジーの日常化を考える**

Kyoto: Kitaouji Shobo, 2006

Kae Ishii

Received: 31 August 2008 / Accepted: 31 August 2008 / Published online: 8 May 2009
© National Science Council, Taiwan 2009

It is astonishing to see how widespread and important Information and Communication Technology like the Internet and cellular phones (*keitai*, “something you carry with you”) have become in Japanese society. Japanese youth use *keitai* more than PCs, according research. Even elementary school students are using *keitai* to communicate with their friends and to protect themselves. Adults not only make calls via Internet or *keitai* but collect information, chat, shop, and read. They also use Internet and *keitai* to work at home while they are caring for children and doing housework.

The possibilities of Information and Communication Technology are an unknown quantity. Since 1980, scholars of social history and cultural studies on technologies in Japan and in the West have studied the history of early mass communication—specifically the telegraph and telephone—in the context of today's Internet and cellular phones. The economic and business applications of Japan's communication infrastructure have aroused the interest of Japanese scholars. Since the 1990s, however, there has been increasing scholarly attention to social and cultural aspects of pagers and *keitai* in Japan.

Personal, Portable, Pedestrian is a collection of scholarly essays, with a disciplinary base in social and cultural studies, examining the relationship between

K. Ishii (✉)

Department of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Shitennoji University, Osaka, Japan
e-mail: kae@shitennoji.ac.jp

keitai and the Japanese people. The book breaks new ground in two ways: First, although this is only the most recent instance in which Japanese scholars from the disciplines of sociology, cultural studies, media studies, anthropology, and education have turned their attention to *keitai*, its Japanese version is easy for college students to access because of its reasonable price and its straightforward contents and layout. Second, this book was initially released in English with the intention of informing non-Japanese-speaking people of the development and diversity of *keitai* research in Japan (see p. i in English version). Most of the papers collected in this volume were initially presented in Japanese at a workshop sponsored by the DoCoMo House design cottage at Keio University (December 2002). These presentations were published in English in 2005. The DoCoMo House was founded by the Nippon Telegraph & Telephone DoCoMo to conduct research about *keitai* and provided the financial support for translation and editing of this book.

The editors specify to reasons why it was specifically important to introduce the newest *keitai* research in Japan to English-speaking people. The first is that “almost all *keitai* matters transmitted from Japan to foreign countries are talked of in the context of a success story of business or of a kind of Japanese techno culture like *anime* (animation) and video games” (p. i in English version). Therefore, sociological and cultural studies of *keitai* have gained little notice because of linguistic and disciplinary barriers. Although a steady stream of English social science texts have been translated into Japanese, the reverse is rare (p. 4 in English version). That is why its impact is all the more important and why it is heartening that foreign journals like *New Media and Society* and *Wired New* noticed and reviewed the book. In 2006, this book appeared not only in its second edition but also in paperback. The Japanese version contains revised and new papers. This Japanese version has also entered its second edition, with an introduction by *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* (17.6.2007), one of Japan's most prestigious newspapers.

In terms of structure and content, there are several differences between the English and Japanese versions. Between 2002 and 2006, not only Japanese society but also *keitai* technologies changed. In this book review, I will restrict myself principally to examining the Japanese version because, with the exception of newly added papers like Chaps. 3 and 11 in the Japanese version, all were written in Japanese for presentation at the workshop and were then translated into English. Many of the original Japanese texts were published in the Japanese version. The Introduction and Chaps. 6, 7, 9, and 10 were amended and expanded to reflect new research and new *keitai* technologies. However, the following three themes are central to both versions: “Cultures and Imaginaries,” “Social Networks and Relationships,” and “Practice and Place.” I will now summarize the papers in the Japanese version in terms of these themes.

“*Cultures and Imaginaries*” Chapter 1, “The Anti-Ubiquitous Territory Machine” (by Kenichi Fujimoto), frames *keitai* as a business-oriented technology that was hijacked by popular youth cultures in the late 1990s. Since then, *keitai* have been used with straps by young people as a “territory machine,” to create personal space within the urban environment, and it therefore became the original object of gadget fetishism and technofashion. Chapter 2, “Japanese Youth and Imagining of *Keitai*” (by Haruhiro Kato) analyzes the themes of video productions by Japanese college

students on the subject of *keitai*. They portray *keitai* as an indispensable aspect of everyday life. Chapter 3, “From Research about *Keitai* to Research with *Keitai*” (by Fumitoshi Kato), shows one example of the multifunction use of *keitai* discussing so-called “mobile research” in the area of marketing, in which camera-equipped *keitai* are used as a research tool.

“*Social Networks and Relationships*” Chapter 4, “The Mobile-izing Japanese” (by Kakuko Miyata/Jeffrey Boase/Barry Wellman/Ken'ichi Ikeda), finds, through its case study in Yamanashi, that *keitai* use is correlated with a greater volume of e-mails to people who are geographically and socially closer than those sent by PCs. *Keitai* communities have become wider and more pluralistic than traditional village communities. Chapter 5, “Accelerating Reflexivity” (by Ichiyo Habuchi) focuses on *deai* (dating in Japanese) practices among Japanese youth and interviews with young *keitai* users and examines the current role of *keitai* communications. Chapter 6, “Keitai and the Intimate Stranger” (by Hidenori Tomita) focuses more specifically on *deai* cultures through telecommunication, sketches its historical development in Japan, describes the emergence of anonymous relationships between men and women, and looks at the new relationships of the future.

“*Practice and Place*” Chapter 7, “Keitai in Public Transportation as a Site of Negotiation” (by Daisuke Okabe/Mizuko Ito) interviews people in western and eastern parts of Japan, analyzing the negotiations and the web of interactions surrounding the manners of *keitai* users on trains, and sketches the process of domestication and incorporation of the new technology in changing socio-cultural circumstances. Chapter 8, “Home, Housewife and *Keitai*” (by Shingo Dobashi) consists of interviews with housewives, their husbands, and children and analyses the status and the meaning of *keitai* in comparison with the personal computer. The author insists that *keitai* reproduces the social order in the family, and does not destroy it, even though *keitai* is the new technology. On the other hand, *keitai* enables children to have privacy and therefore to separate themselves from parental constraints. Chapter 9, “Design of *Keitai* Technology and Its Use Among Service Engineers” (by Eriko Tamaru/Naoki Ueno) examines *keitai* as an instrument that service engineers can use to supervise their colleagues and describes how *keitai* can help to restructure the hierarchical relationship between workers and the call center at the employment agency which tells the people, who have registered with them, where they should report to work. Chapter 10, “Technosocial Situations” (by Mizuko Ito/Daisuke Okabe) interviews people in western and eastern part of Japan, uses a diary-based method to collect private mail, and concludes that *keitai* could not only destroy the old border but also structure the emergent technosocial order. Chapter 11, “Ethnography of the Use of *Keitai* Camera” (by Daisuke Okabe/Mizuko Ito) introduces a new way to use a *keitai* camera for “personal archiving” (for example: visual and news sharing among friends) and shows that visual messages are more selectively shared among close friends compared to mail.

The book has succeeded in showing the role of mobile communications in Japanese culture through rich empirical case studies examining human relationships in contemporary Japanese society. By using interviews and participant observation, this book spotlights diverse sites like trains, homes, and workplaces where *keitai* are

used every day, also examining relationships between parents and children, friends and lovers, in the context of communication by *keitai*. The range of approaches, from the voices and ethnographic films of college students to the *keitai* story, *keitai* photos, *keitai* mails, and the tracing of activity by Global Positioning System, is one of the attractive points of this book. In each chapter, we can see the transforming process of *keitai* use among businessmen, media, and youth, “moral panic” in the train in relation to the manner of its use, changing human relationships between family members and friends, and changing hegemony in society and in the workplace. Further aspects are the uses and possibilities of *keitai* and “techno-nationalism,” which emerged after the burst of the technology-bubble economy, and the explosive popularization of *keitai*. Through this collection of diverse works, we can see the Japanese (and global) contexts of *keitai* and understand why the Japanese use this term for their cellular phones. This term does not connote technical capability (the cellular phone of the USA) or freedom of movement (the mobile of the UK) but intimacy and portability, a defining personal accessory that allows constant social connection.

Finally, I suggest three points for further research. The first has to do with comparative and cooperative surveys about *keitai*. This book is certain to be very helpful for non-Japanese-speaking researchers wishing to understand the Japanese socio-cultural contexts of *keitai*. Ito states in her introduction that this book examines the social and cultural diversity of mobile phone use. The book's strategy, however, is to approach this issue not through a comparative or global survey of mobile phone use but rather through a multifaceted and sustained engagement within a single national context (p. 4 in English version). However, there are not only cross-national similarities but also differences, which we can call “Japanese culture embedded,” and that developed under specific historical, political, and social conditions. For example, I am not sure that the train can be a site for negotiations in the manner of *keitai* users in other countries. In Japanese trains, people have to take more care not to bother other passengers because trains are often filled to bursting, especially in the big cities (Chap. 7). I also wonder if the nexus of home, housewife, and mobile phone is as solid in other countries. Is it a universal phenomenon that children use mobile phones to have privacy and to separate themselves from their limitations imposed by their parents? (Cha. 8) Through these case studies, we can see how different the meanings and functions of Japanese trains and families are from those in other countries and how deeply *keitai* is embedded. We can understand this only through careful comparative studies of countries and regions: what meanings and functions *keitai* has and which historical, political, and social conditions in Japan contribute to them.

My second suggestion is to turn our attention not only to the beneficial aspects of *keitai* but also to its more sinister ones. Many authors in this book hint at a negative side of *keitai*. For example, Tomita mentions (p. 186 in English version; p. 150 in Japanese one) that anonymity enables people to date without meeting and causes social problems such as slander, defamation, or the misrepresentation of identity (Chap. 6). Another example: When some people were killed in Akihabara (Tokyo) earlier this year by a young Japanese man (25 years old), passers-by took pictures of the crime scene and the dead bodies with *keitai* cameras; the media accused them of being “immoral.” In the age of Information and Communication Technology, media

ethics is of critical importance. Incidentally, this criminal was hired as a temporary worker at an auto parts factory, though he was recently told that his job was going to be cut. According to his testimony, that was one of the motivations for him to massacre innocent people. Nowadays, working conditions for young Japanese people (so-called “Lost Generation,” which includes Japanese people from about 25 to 35 years old) are getting harder. Many of them do not have the security of a lifelong job and tend to take temporary jobs in which working conditions are often miserable. They receive information about such jobs from the employment agency, with which they are registered by *keitai*. As many authors mention in this book, *keitai* themselves are not responsible for that. Tamaru and Ueno, the authors of Chap. 9, articulate it as follows: “Rather, the meaning of *keitai* is located in specific practice and use contexts” (p. 255 in the English version; p. 220 in the Japanese one). Social scientists have to be more aware of both sides of *keitai*; although *keitai* has limitless possibilities, they can be abused and lead to alienation.

In this connection, I puzzled as to why only Chap. 9 is concerned with *keitai* use in the workplace. This chapter is an empirical case study of the relationship between *keitai* and workers and the restructuring of a control system from a centralized to a self-regulated one. Indeed, we can learn many things from its approach, framework, and dense ethnography, but its conclusion is ambiguous. According to Tamaru and Ueno, the self-dispatch system appears to be operating smoothly, but new problems could emerge from this self-regulated system. During busy times, the ability to visualize the whole working area makes some technicians feel rushed or feel that it is easier to be directed (p. 249 in English version; pp. 212–213 in Japanese one). The self-regulated system could cause overwork, although workers feel as if they are not controlled by the company and the call center. It is certainly not the aim of this chapter to give an opinion about that kind of problem, but this issue is becoming critical in Japanese society where many people are literally dying from overwork. My third suggestion is therefore to investigate *keitai* use in the workplace, to analyze Japanese society more critically, and to arrive at the real picture.

In any case, this book has made it to the top of Japanese academic research about *keitai* from sociological and cultural perspectives and is a guide for Japanese scholars of the humanities and social sciences. Its example provides a motivation to Japanese scholars to share their original research with scholars in foreign countries and not just to receive English social science texts and translate them into Japanese.