Revitalizing East Asia's Old Virtue of Filial Piety in 21st Century Informational City? Social Shaping of New Media for Inter-Generational Communication in Global Ageing

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1. Global ageing in the information age

Demographic transitions become a global challenge, as the ageing momentum is at its high speed in recent decades, problematically juxtaposing the economic liberalization of the globalization project: global elderly ratio is forecasted to double in 2030 years. The critical problems for ageing society in developing economies are many, not least are the 'cash' – the financing (in terms of health care and pension system) and 'care' of the fragile aged. Demographic transitions occurred in Japan and all Asia's newly industrializing economies (NIEs): South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. These countries have been transformed from the high birth and death rate population model to a low birth rate (less than 2 in terms of Total Fertility Rate, TFR) and ageing one. Japan had 23% of the total population aged 65 or above, whilst Korea achieved 12% in 2011. Compared with the Western developed economies, demographic transitions towards ageing in East Asia are more dramatic with a hyper and speedy one (Lai 2007; Mason & Kinugasa 2008).

Global Ageing Estimates (aged 65 or above as % of the total population) **2011**

Japan	23%	Spain	17%	Netherlands	14%	Hong Kong	13%
Italy	20%	Austria	16%	USA	13%	Taiwan	12%
Sweden	19%	France	16%	Australia	13%	South Korea	12%
Germany	18%	Swiss	16%	Canada	13%	Singapore	9.5%
Norway	17%	U.K.	16%	_____		China	11%

(Source: Lai 2008, authors' updates)

2. The thousand-year-old calling for filial piety in 21st century?

Confucianism defines socio-cultural ideals for East Asia; China, Korea and Japan in particular. One of the key virtues of Confucianism is *Filial Piety* (FP) – taking care of the ageing parents in one's life course: social reciprocity and familial loyalty are Confucian norms, attribute to FP as both virtue and behaviours. But the supply side of FP (sons and daughters) is sharply reduced because of the followings: (1) the decline of women fertility rate in the wake of modernization and westernization in East Asia; (2) workers under a new regime of flexible-global production,

they (women in particular) have to moving into different localities for job and to engage in a 7-day-and-24-hour working cycle – people are more nomadic yet less available for taking care of the ageing parents; (3) younger generations can choosing his/her (self-biographization of their) life course (Vinken 2004; Mayer 2004), hence s/he can be always a child without getting married or having children. All this implies traditional role model for caring the aged within the realm of FP has its limits, if not impossible to be realized in modern Asia.

The obvious solutions in capitalism are to "employing" professionals or helpers to take care of ageing parents – the professionalization of elderly care or importing foreign domestic helpers and the industrialization of elderly nursing care services. Recently, information and communication technologies (ICT) indeed help to re-making a new form of FP in 21st century; and we will outline such development with critical remarks in this paper.

3. Embracing New Media by Ageing Population?

With the maximal use of ICT, we are in the information age. And ageing policy initiatives have been taking the advantageous offerings of ICT for social development at large: for instance, the European Union's *Action Plan (2007-2015) for Ageing Well in the Information Society.* With the similar policy learning, Japanese government's goal is to build up a so-called *u-Japan* (*ubiquitous Japan*). This is very much in line with the policy initiative in most of the Asia's NIEs which have already been developing their portals for an e-government and e-commerce, and the development is always making mobile communication ubiquitous and omnipotent. This mega-project initiative will and should be instrumental for enabling better quality of ageing life. ICT promise borderless, flexible and ubiquitous contacts: real time, round-the-clock and anywhere… making geo-spatial conditions all but irrelevant. The ICT empowered digital gadgets and platforms, like mobile phone, PDA, iPod, i-Pad, and Facebook and Twitter respectively, have been facilitating various communicative encounters in both real and virtual worlds, with differential form of, mobile, mediated networking in new social life.

Mobile phone definitely extends one's personal networking and social space, at the very least extending the communicator's horizon of information; this is juxtaposing the reinforcement of the existing socio-familial contacts as well, say, the inter-generation communication between parents and kids, senior adults to their younger family members. Yet, the diffusion of mobile communication is socially differentiated, so do the beneficiaries for mobile digital gadgets (phone

and PDA) users. In spite of the increasingly taking up of mobile communication by Asian (Japanese and Chinese in particular) societies, there is an age-specific digital divide in terms of the usage of mobile communication. Similar digital divides are evident in terms of household income and the mode of access, in geo-economic-social terms, along the socio-economic fault-lines of contemporary society.

Two obvious Japanese case illustrations, with strong relevance for ageing-in-place (elderly living at home, in the community) stand out in the *u-Japan* project. First, it is the advanced application of the global-positioning–system (GPS) with the cellular mobile communication network. For example, the monthly Yen 210 "ima-doco" service, to track the where about of the mobile phone user, with a GPS location-based device embedded on the specific subscriber's mobile phone, connecting to cellular mobile communication networks, developed by NTT-DoCoMo, to find and locate children and elderly has been well received by customers, who want to know where their aged and younger (children) member real time location is.

Similar services are also provided by other mobile phone operating agencies, like au-KDDI and the Softbank. Despite their differential pricing and services, they are somewhat in common for the 'monitoring' or 'surveillance' and online-real time contacting aspects for the younger and elders in the family. There is also alarm forwarding function to family members, via the security agency: mobile phone user in emergency can press the alarm which forwards helping message to the control centre. Or if the mobile phone user is unable to respond, due to dangerous conditions, to the pre-set contact time period (say, beyond 1 hour non-response) or outside the signal-catchment area, (say, route to and back from school/shopping) the mobile phone's last known or real time location signal will be automatically transmitted to the concerned parties for follow up action (NTT 2008).

Mobile communication service oriented toward elderly health needs is also available in au-KDDI's Helpnet and NTT's Life Support. The former is a one-button push emergency service to signal the location of the caller, the latter connects volunteers with elderly people living alone (Srivastava, 2004: 249; 2005).

The second example is e-health and/or tele-health service initiatives. Maintaining good health conditions is for active ageing-in-place, some government and health organizations have been

experiment the e-health or tele-health initiatives, by transferring medical information and advice through broadband network (MIC 2007). These initiatives enable a close and real time monitoring of seniors adults' health conditions, and offering timely medical advice and referrals. Undoubtedly these sorts of active ageing-in-place initiatives are feasible when *u-Japan* project proceeds to a maturing stage. Hence, the promise of ageing-in-place, with an electronic-digitally integrated health service regime, is beginning to fulfil.

4. Mobile Communication for Active Ageing: Rejuvenating Filial Piety?

In East Asia, there are increasing senior adults taking up mobile communication with their family members and friends. The governmental initiatives like *u-Japan* project and the market driven promotion (with the re-designing) for elderly friendly mobile phone mark such trend: simple and functional for the ageing users are the key concepts, with bigger character-size(ing) for key-pad and display, louder volume control, and pre-set phone number for their frequent calls.

Yet, the development of mobile communication is a path-dependent one following not just the network development logics as shaped by market force and the state project for modernization, but also the fulfilment of social needs as circumstances arise. The social shaping of the *u-Japan* are more than obvious, as represented by the momentum and dynamics of the mode(s), patterns and of *keitai* (mobile) communication in Japan, which emerge, or have been emerging, from "a historically specific series of negotiations and contestations within and outside Japanese society" (Ito 2005: 15). Such Japanese idiosyncrasy highlights the specificity of human-technology interfacing for mobile communicator, what, where and how he/she can communicate (with whom) though is much shaped by the network conditions of pricing and technology as defined by the limited mobile service providers, it is equally conditioned by the expected and perceived beneficiaries, adapting to socio-familial reciprocity and norms. In short, recent maximal use of mobile phone for ensuring human security at large, attempting to strengthen socio-familial ties, redefines the contours of the "bounded" mobile communication.

Socio-cultural change shapes ICT usage, yet inter-personalized mobile communications will interface, intertwine and synergize with socio-cultural domains. Our previous discourse on the interfacing, repercussions, and synergetic effects of mobile communication in general, the mobile phone in particular, though positively point to, or oriented towards, a better future, but it

might reproduce the problems of media-centrism, namely, missing out the non-participants, the digital exclusion and divides.

Likewise, the competitive market force shapes the emergence of mobile network agencies. Their differential logics of operation, business models, integrating fixed line and mobile network with the Internet, the (users-) content-and-social relationship (social network service) providing agencies (like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and Youtube) and the techno-specificity (e.g., telephony of IP phone, VoIP and the Skype-in/out) will likely determine the actual way(s) and mode(s) of mobile communication for people: how, under what socio-spatial conditions and with what pricing. Hence mobile communication will be still much a "bounded" one, though with more (re-)discovery of new socio-spatial sense beyond the question of "Where are You Now?"

For the best scenarios, mobile communication enables beneficiaries that the reinforcement of social relationship and the extension of socio-spatial network go hand-in-hand with good social consequences. With mobile phone and/or the Internet connectivity available, offering the real time audio sound bits and/or video images, there is likelihood for an enhanced inter-generational communication between the senior and younger members of the family / society in future – hopefully this is a rejuvenation of East Asian old virtue of filial piety in 21st century informational age.

But for social consequences of mobile communication, the social destiny at large, are highly uncertain, if not unknown, as many mobile communication studies note, and communication experience confirm, that the inter-personal mobile communication is reinforcing and redefining the existing social relationship, sometimes creating the new (intimate) one. Yet, the contrary might be also true that, mobile communication is to guard against the unwelcoming encounters as well as nurturing one's narcissism. To make an interim remark here, mobile communication is more technologically known but the social destiny for human(ity) - mobile communication interfacing in ageing society, is definitely uncertain!

References are not included here but are available from the author or from the following:

Lai, On-Kwok (2008). The Enigma of Japanese Ageing-in-Place Practice in the Information Age: Does Digital Gadget Help the (Good) Practice for Inter-Generation Care? *Ageing International*. 32: 236-255.