

# Social Impacts of Mobile Phones on the Life of the Chinese People

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## **HISTORY OF TELECOMMUNICATION AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF MOBILE PHONES IN CHINA**

The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. The public telecommunication services were not well developed until the early 1990s (Li, 2009). Before then the majority of families did not have access to landline telephones in their homes. People depended on public telephone services to communicate to others. However, with such inconvenient communication channels, most people preferred to correspond through the mail to families and friends (People's Daily Online, 2002). As economic development progressed in China in the early 1990s, home phones became more accessible. By the end of July, 2002, there were over 200 million home landline phone users, which ranked China first in the world (People's Daily Online, 2002). With the development of telecommunication infrastructure and businesses, telephone communications had become the new way for social interaction. At the same time people were adopting telephones they were also adopting the use of pagers because this allowed them to become mobile and still communicate with others from a distance (Li, 2009). The ability to communicate with others on the move has laid the foundation for the adaptation of mobile phones.

According to People's Daily Online (2002), mobile telephone service was opened to the public in 1988. In 1997, there were approximately 10 million mobile phone users and in 2002, there were 180 million subscribers. Therefore, China was ranked first in the world for mobile phones also (People's Daily Online, 2002). By 2005, the

number increased to 240 million mobile phone users (Branigan, 2010). The ability to communicate with others while on the go in daily life had become a major requirement among people during the period of economic development. When mobile phones (手机 or *shouji* in Chinese) were introduced into China, the advanced technology was immediately accepted. The major reason is because of the convenience to communicate to others no matter where you are (Li & Ji, 2005). Today, China's total population has reached 1.35 billion. As of 2013 there were 1.22 billion mobile phones (The Economic Times, 2013). Many individuals own more than one mobile phone and 87% of the services are purchased using prepaid calling cards. This is quite a large percentage when compared to the fact that only 20% of Americans choose prepaid services (Shan, 2010).

Compared with America and European countries, Chinese consumers are more willing to adopt new mobile phone technology and the usage of the phones is more frequent (Shan, 2010). For example, in 2013 China surpassed the U.S. as the world's largest market for smart phones (Kan, 2013). With the expansion of advanced communication technology, internet services for mobile phones are now available. For example, many people now read newspapers from their smart phones instead of purchasing them from a newsstand (Chen & Xia, 2007; Kuang, 2005). According to the statistics (Sina.com, 2013), there were 591 million Chinese internet users, among which 464 million of them accessed the internet by way of mobile phones. In the early 1990s, there were very few Chinese people who knew about the "worldwide web." For example, there

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were only 45 million Chinese who surfed on the internet at least one hour a week in 2002, ranking third in the world (People's Daily Online, 2002).

When mobile phones were first introduced, the new technology immediately drew attention to scientists and engineers from different industrial fields. However, when mobile phones became widely accepted, this is when social scientists began to create great interests in how mobile phones impact social interactions in people's everyday life and the change it has made for the culture and traditions in their society. Dr. Katz and Dr. Aakhus (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Katz, 1997) at Rutgers University and Dr. Aoki and Dr. Downes (Aoki & Downes, 2002) at Boston University are among the earliest scholars examining the above topics. Now there are numerous social scientists throughout the world studying the social effects of mobile phones on new types of social interactions and mobile communications among people. The leading scholars include Dr. Barkhuus and Dr. Polichar (Barkhuus & Polichar 2010) at University of California at San Diego and Dr. Humphreys (Humphreys, 2005) at Cornell University. Dr. Kuang (Kuang, 2006) at Renmin University of China is among the earliest Chinese scholars examining the topics of social influence of mobile communication. Dr. Kuang (Kuang, 2005; 2013; Kuang & Li, 2008; Kuang & Wang, 2009; Kuang & Wang, 2010) is still one of the current Chinese leading experts in the research areas of mobile phones and network media.

## **THE POPULARITY OF TEXT MESSAGING**

When mobile phones were adopted, Chinese people quickly accepted text messaging (短信 or *duanxin* or short message in Chinese). About 830 billion text messages were sent by Chinese people through mobile phones in 2010 (CMIIT, 2011). This has brought Chinese telecommunication businesses several billion Ren Min Bi (RMB is Chinese currency, \$100 (U.S.) = ¥ 624 as of June,

2014). Xu (2014) indicated that text messaging is the most frequently used function on mobile phones. It has become the most effective way to communicate about the interactions of individuals' daily lives. Text messaging is also the most significant method of mass communication (Min, 2013). It is considered the fifth mass media in the Chinese society, which is considered to be 'socialized media' (Zhang & Jin, 2010, Jiang, 2009). The other four forms of media include newspapers, broadcasting, television, and internet. These four forms are all controlled by different levels of authorities and the China government (Li, 2009). This means that there are no real time interactions between the media and their audience. Text messaging is different from the above mass medium because there is no authority involved (Zhang & Jin, 2010; Kong, 2012). These messages allow for anonymity and mass communication with open expressions of their opinions. Text messaging also provides a possibility for people to receive information 24 hours a day (Sina.com, 2013). Electronic mail and other internet services can serve a similar function for people who would like to send information (Li, 2009). However, many Chinese people's viewpoints are that email and internet are not as popular or as fast as texting is (Li, 2009). Text messages enhance people's relationships by increasing their interactions (Xia, 2012). In China most people would consider their mobile phone numbers to be public information and not private. This is the opposite when compared to American society (Li, 2009).

Texting is not only used for establishing relationships, Chinese people also send text messages for other purposes, for example, for patient reminders (Downer, Meara, Costa, & Sethuraman, 2006) or banking purposes (Wenku.baidu.com, 2012). Text messaging can also play an important role during a national crisis, such as a natural disaster. For example, when an earthquake hit the Wenchuan area in the Sichuan province in 2008, the news was immediately dispatched to the entire nation via text messages (Chen & Mou, 2009; Kuang & Wang, 2009). People were united,

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