‘Magic Wand’: Mobile Phones and Fujian Entrepreneurs in China

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ABSTRACT

Mobile telephony was first adopted by business people, specifically small and medium-sized entrepreneurs. Their use habits have thus contributed to the evolvement of the mobile and change in business practice. However, there are limited studies that examine individual business users, even fewer exploring the social roles of mobile phones for Chinese entrepreneurship. This study, applying social shaping of technology complemented with affordance theory and domestication theory, qualitatively analyses implications of the mobile phone constructed by entrepreneurs in Fujian Province, China. Findings indicate that mobile telephony has significantly transformed business practice of time and space by Fujian entrepreneurs. It changes time constraints by enabling a 24-hour business contact. It affects the spatial location with a ‘mobile office’. It becomes a platform for staging a tricky business performance. It interconnects business and private lives. Consequently it becomes the ‘magic wand’ -- the central axis around which the lives of Fujian entrepreneurs revolve.

Keywords: Business Use, China, Fujian Entrepreneurs, Mobile Phones, Social Shaping of Technology

INTRODUCTION

One noticeable aspect in the mobile telephone development in China is that the mobile phone was initially used by business people for business-oriented activities. Business people, especially entrepreneurs of small and medium-sized businesses, have become one of the crucial user groups of the device. Their use habits have thus contributed to the development of various types of mobile phones and service packages specifically catered to the business community. However, the social meanings of the business use of mobile phones in China remain considerably unexamined.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it attempts to situate the social roles of the mobile phone within the Chinese context of the economic development, private entrepreneurship and aspiration for modernization. In less than two decades, China leaped from a pre-industrial stage of minimum landline penetration to the world’s number one in mobile phone population, 608 million in mid-2008 (People’s Net 2008). As Guo and Wu (2009) point out that this development is rather different from the Western experience where mobile communication arrived a century later after telephony.
They argue that mobile telephony attains a new set of social significance in China. It is above all instrumental for economic development and mass entrepreneurship as it advanced in a society which, lacking essential industrial facilities such as a universal telephone service, highway system, public transit network, etc., was under great pressure of industrial imperatives (Guo & Wu 2008).

As researchers note, wireless technologies were initially invented for business people (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2004). Castells et al (2004) observed that worldwide, business users occupy a leading market in mobile phone services; the business user group is especially large in developing countries like China and the Philippines. However, studies on the social implications of the mobile phone in business usage are rather limited. The few mobile phone studies analysing business impacts mostly emphasise the mobile phone’s impact on the macro-economy of society (Gary & Scott, 2000; Katia, n.d.; Norton, 1992). On the other hand, some mobile phone studies do cover business usage, but they are mainly concerned with motivations and gratifications of business users (e.g. Ling, 2004; Wei & Leung, 2000). A small number of studies on mobile phone use and micro-enterprises were conducted in developing countries especially African countries, (e.g. Donner, 2004; Goodman, 2005; Samuel, Shah & Hadingham, 2005). Although these studies offer some details into mobile phone usage of small business owners, they shed limited light on the large theoretical investigation of the social roles that the mobile phone facilitates in creating a new social-techno environment for entrepreneurship, business operation and the globalised market.

In conceptualizing the social effects of mobile communication technology, Castells et al (2004) point to one of the fundamental concerns, how our practice of time and space has been changed as a result of wireless communication. They reiterate the major thesis in Castells’ previous trilogy on the network society that new forms of space and time – the space of flows and timeless time -- have emerged. The mobile phone does not transcend space and time, but it “blurs spatial contexts and time frames” (Castells et al 2004, 241). This point is similarly echoed by Geser (2004) when he argues that the freedom from the constraints of physical proximity and spatial immobility in communication constitutes a significant social meaning of the mobile phone.

This study is particularly concerned with how the practice of space and time of private entrepreneurs in China is transformed with the use of mobile phones, how this new spatial-temporal environment gives rise to new uses of the artefact which were never intended by its industrial designers, and how it interconnects the spheres of business and private lives. Specifically, the investigation is theorised in an integrated model which is set within the framework of social shaping of communication technology complemented by two other perspectives, namely affordance theory and domestication theory. The highly interactive relationship between business users and the mobile phone not only carries social bearings, but also inhabits technological affordance for users to explore new possibilities of usage and human agency in ‘taming’ and ‘cultivating’ the artefact into their daily life. The business community studied is in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, which is well known for its vigorous private entrepreneurship, rapid economic development and high level penetration of mobile phones.

Our findings indicate that the mobile phone has significantly transformed business practice of time and space by Fujian entrepreneurs who operate in a highly competitive market. To survive they have to exert all their efforts to attend to every potential customer, not only locally, but also nationally or internationally. The mobile phone, as the most interactive and indispensable artefact, provides a range of affordances for Fujian entrepreneurs to have a greater play in their initiatives and aspirations to succeed in the business enterprise. First, it changes time constraints for Fujian business people by enabling a 24-hour contact in business operations. With the mobile phone, the
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