CELLPHONE USE AND TIBETAN MODERNITY: A CASE STUDY ON CELLPHONE USE IN AMDO TIBETAN COMMUNITY

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ICT's particularly cellphones, have been keenly adopted among Tibetans. This paper describes the use of cellphones in Tibetan society and explains their effects on Tibetan experiences. Generally, the study investigates the social consequences of cellphones on political, economic, and cultural aspects. It investigates the impact of mobiles on Tibetan social capital (i.e., family ties, friendship), access to new information (e.g. daily news report), and uses during emergencies (e.g. seeking a doctor under serious conditions). The scope of this study includes four different social groups (e.g. students, monks, villagers and government officers). The study aims to examine how cellphone use affects peoples' interpersonal relationships and their consequences for the public and private spheres in Tibetan life. The cellphone is more than simply a technical innovation. Like all technologies, cellphones affect both inner and outer aspects of personal identity. Tibetan modernity is increasingly being defined by technologies that allow mediated social relationships. ICT plays a significant role in these mediations and its study is crucial for understanding contemporary Tibetan society.

Keywords: ICT (Information and Communication Technology), Tibetan modernity, public and private sphere, social capital, individualism

INTRODUCTION

Western modernity depends on the clear separation of the private from the public sphere. The public sphere emphasizes legal and political norms rather than private interests and beliefs. Since Tibetan society has its own particularities, cellphone use in Tibet differs significantly from its use in the West. Although cellphones enhance and expand their users' private worlds, notions of private and public are not clearly distinguished in Tibetan society. Thus, its use may conflate domestic concerns with public interests. It is obvious in the Tibetan case that cellphones are not only used for connectivity but also as a symbol of socio-economic status. People see someone who owns a cellphone as a member of a higher social status. Cellphone use is also one of the indicators for gender difference since more males than females have cellphones.

Tibetans use cellphones mainly to call their relatives, friends and fellow villagers. Unlike the Philippines, people rarely text each other in Tibetan society. They never text strangers as Filipinos do (Pertierra et al. 2002), unless the number is accidentally dialed. Tibetans generally build and extend networks and

relationships with existing members rather than including strangers. The use of cellphones makes possible the widening inclusion of interlocutors to a much broader social sphere. Cellphone use thus enables the breaching of boundaries within particular localities to include neighboring groups.

The mass media is gradually influencing aspects of everyday Tibetan life. The rapid growth of communicative technologies such as the Internet, television, newspapers, and cellphones is dramatically affecting and changing people's life ways. People no longer need to travel physically from one community to another to communicate. Modern technologies easily and conveniently enable mediated communication.

Pertierra et al. (2002:101) shows that these communicative technologies such as cellphones have the potential to transform private opinions into public interests and to reshape the public sphere in terms of decision-making and political issues. The implications of these new technologies for organizing work and other activities are significant. Physical and temporal barriers no longer prevent people from communicating and exchanging information. This example is a global phenomenon which we refer to presently as global modernity. In global modernity, localities are no longer as deeply structured as they were in the past but are significantly affected and are shaped by mass media and the global economy. This paper does not seek to explain how this new technology developed in Tibetan society. Instead, it aims to describe how the people act and respond to this new phenomenon.

Communication technology has developed rapidly and has been adopted in everyday practices. Although this technology is pervasive, we are still unsure of the social consequences of cellphone communication (Ling 2004). This research examines the different uses of cellphones and to investigate its impact on everyday life in Tibetan society. Until now, Tibetan research about cellphones is minimal and mostly concerns commercially proposed topics such as the cellphones sales and the response of customers to advertisements. However, the general impact of cellphones on society, its everyday use, and its implications for broader society have received little emphasis.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Nowadays, more people are using cellphones as a device that augments and complements their everyday activities. By looking at the use of cellphones of four different social groups (i.e., students, villagers, monks, and government officials), this paper explores the cultural meanings that have emerged and been shaped through its use. The impact of cellphone use on each of these different social groups is analyzed in the paper.

The general objective of the study is to explore the kind of modernity that has taken place in local society. What are the characteristics of Tibetan modernity? How do these characteristics emerge and shape the cultural attitudes and self-

identities of Tibetans? What are the basic explanations for the increasing use of the cellphone among Amdo Tibetans? This study provides some answers to these questions.

The cellphone is more than a communicative device that makes life more convenient for Tibetans. It is also a device in which people construct new identities and beliefs under the project of modernity (Pertierra et al. 2002). For instance, in the Philippines, cellphone use has facilitated political events such as organizing popular protests and demonstrations against the political regime. Similarly, this study investigates the consequences of cellphone use on political, economic, and cultural aspects. It assesses the impact of ICT, particularly cellphone use, for the accumulation of social capital (i.e., family ties, friendship), access to information (e.g. daily news report), and emergency uses (e.g. seeking medical assistance).

FINDINGS: SURVEY RESULTS

In this study, the researcher employed instruments such as survey questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and observation studies. Overall, 106 respondents from both sexes were selectively chosen to comprise the "study population." Out of the 106 respondents, 63 were students, and 43 were from three different social groups such as government officials, monks, and ordinary villagers. One instrument was primarily focused on the demographic profile of respondents (i.e., age, sex, level of education, occupation, income and

etc), in relation to owning and using cellphones. The second survey looked at the use of cellphones in the community, i.e., how useful it is for work, and other ways people routinely use it. There were two versions of the questionnaire: English and Tibetan (part-English, part-Tibetan). Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to organize and analyze the results of the survey questionnaires. In addition, 20 people of both sexes were also separately interviewed in order to examine the different uses of the cellphone among social groups. These surveys were not meant to be truly representative of Ambo Tibetans but rather to provide guides for closer exploration during our interviews.

Demographic profile of the respondents

In our sample, cellphone owners are mostly males (74 percent compared to 26 percent female owners). This is because more men in the community do business outside of their homes while women are more likely to stay home or conduct family related businesses. However, the division of cellphone users between male and female does not always indicate gender difference. Factors such as age, schooling and social status also determine cellphone use. In the case of the college students we interviewed, both male and females shared equal access to cellphones.

According to age, the highest frequency among the samples belonged to the age group of 15-25 years old (55 percent). Moreover, among the 106

people surveyed 46 percent of cellphone owners were students; 22 percent were monks; 18 percent were villagers; and 14 percent were government officers. Our data indicate that cellphone ownership is more likely to be among those who are obtaining a certain educational level. The data showed that 43 percent of those who own cellphones were college students, followed by the high school students at 36 percent.

Our data shows that 76 percent of cellphone owners were single, whereas only 21 percent were married. In terms of geographical location, 72 percent of respondents were in rural areas and about 27 percent of the remaining populations were living in urban areas. In terms of class/status, 52 percent of cellphone owners are in the middle class, 27 percent of lower class and only 20 percent belong to the high social class in terms of their yearly income and family assets. The majority of the respondents earn an annual income of 501-1,000 yuan, with government officials generally earning more compared to the other social groups.

Specific information about cellphone usage

The emergence of cellphone and its use in the Tibetan community is a relatively new phenomenon, and it has become popular mostly among the young people. Figure 1 shows this clearly. Cellphones have been adapted and popularized in Tibetan community just recently compared to other societies like the Philippines, where the cellphone has been used for a longer time. Figure 1 summarizes the trend of cellphone ownership in the Tibetan community. The figure shows that majority of respondents
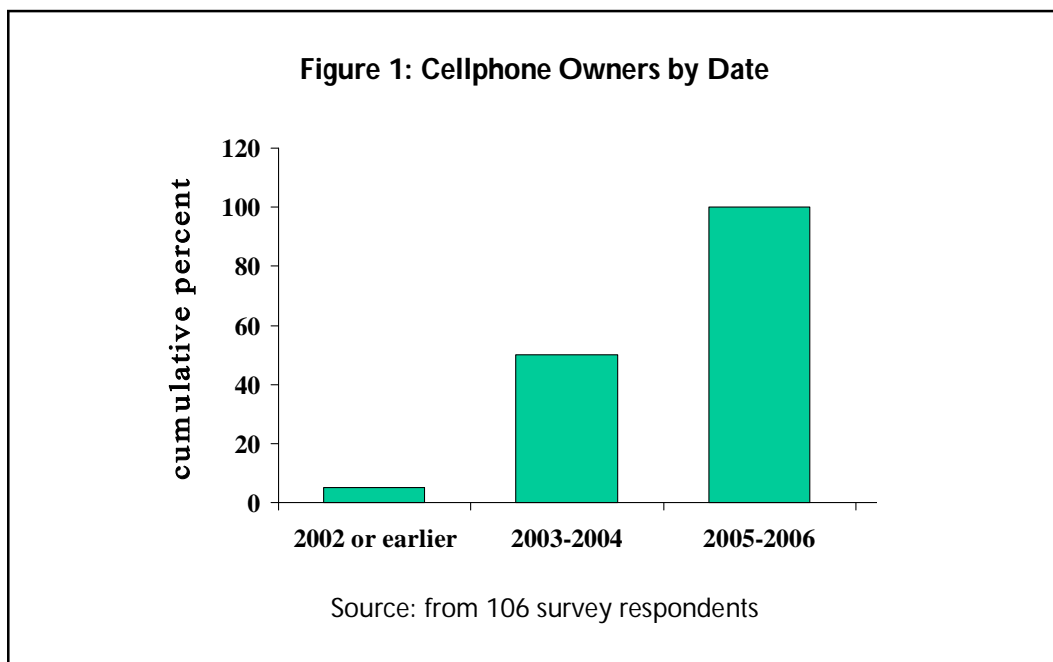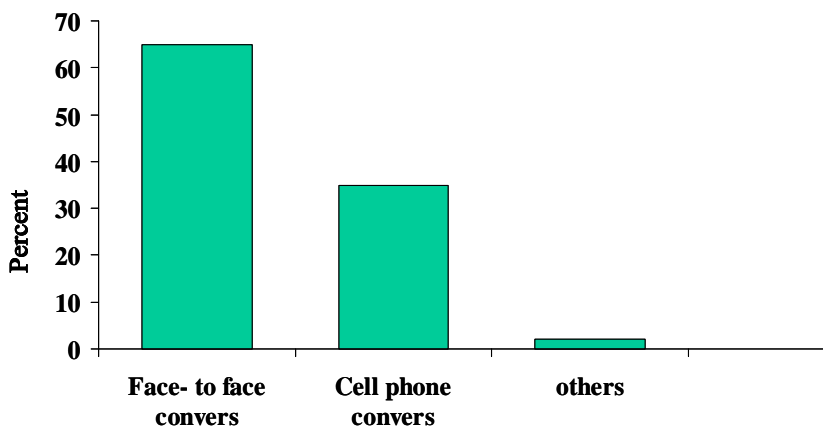

Figure 1: Cellphone Owners by Date

Source: from 106 survey respondents

Figure 2. Preferred Way of Communication Mode



Source: from 106 survey respondents

said that they started owning cellphones between 2005 and 2006.

In Tibetan society, people use cellphones primarily for making a voice call rather than sending text messages. More than half (56%) of the respondents in our survey declared that they prefer a voice call, whereas only 34 percent prefer to send text messages. However, sending text messages is strongly appreciated by students because it is more convenient and much cheaper than voice calls. The results also indicate that those who prefer sending text messages are those who read and type Chinese letters such as students and government officers. Since the texting (sms) function of the cellphone is limited to English and Chinese, it excludes those who cannot read and write in these languages such as ordinary villagers and monks. When asked in what ways the

cellphone is useful, 30 percent answered that the cellphone is useful in emergency cases.

Figure 2 indicates that most informants still prefer face-to-face communication. Apart from the preferred communication mode, when asked when and why they use their cellphones, most of them said that they use their cellphones when they are lonely. Figure 3 illustrates this.

The graph showed that about 40 percent of those surveyed answered that they used the cellphone when they were lonely, whereas about 10 percent and 20 percent declared that they were using their cellphones when depressed or happy. For instance, government officials feel stressed and lonely when they encounter problems at work and they

Figure 3: Respondents' Reasons for Cellphone Use

Source: from 106 survey respondents
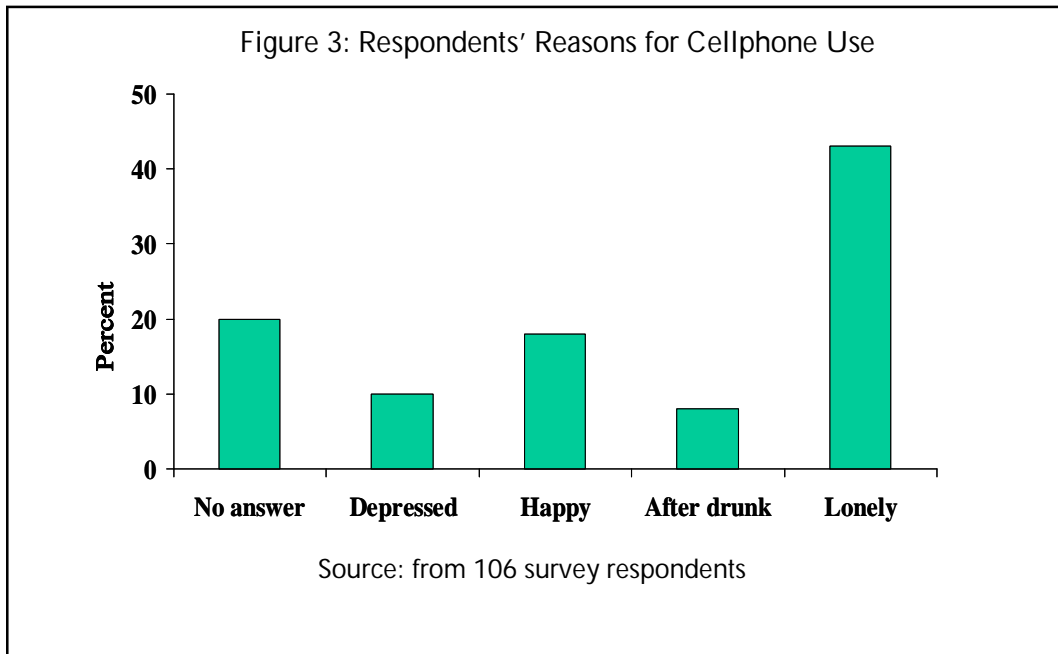
need to get advice from their family or friends. Monks often live far away from their families and they rely on the cellphone to stay in touch. Tibetans are accustomed to having close relationships with relatives and the community, so the cellphone helps in keeping these connections intact. One can interpret these results as indicating that the need for connections is the main imperative for cellphone use. But the widespread use of cellphones among Tibetans, particularly ordinary villagers, does more than maintain traditional relationships or extends networks; it also gains them social status (12%). Thus, the cellphone becomes a medium for helping to construct new identities.

Summary

Studying the use of cellphones among four different occupation categories expresses important features of Tibetan modernity. It has facilitated maintaining networks and allowed for mobility among villagers and monks. It has introduced new indices of status and aesthetics as well as novel forms of entertainment and leisure principally among students and government officials.

Generally, our investigations show that owning a cellphone is a new phenomenon in all of the different occupational categories (students, monks, villagers, and government officials). However, government officials and students owned cellphones much earlier than villagers and monks. This is because

government officials were able to afford cellphones when they were initially expensive in 2001. Since then prices for cellphones have gone down by half, from 2,000 to 1,000 yuan. Another major impediment for ordinary villagers is the fact that cellphones only indicate Chinese or English characters. Thus only students and government officials can use them for text messaging whereas villagers mainly make voice calls. Presently cellphones have become a basic communication tool for both monks and villagers in dealing with ordinary tasks.

Most of the respondents agree that they feel more comfortable and intimate when having face-to-face conversations with their friends and/or family members rather than on their cellphones. Our respondents have different reasons for owning a cellphone. Students and government officials are more likely to assert their status through their cellphones by making their mobile phones fashionable and purchasing the newer models. Meanwhile, villagers and monks own cellphones because they find it important in performing their daily work while keeping in touch with significant others. Villagers also feel that a cellphone elevates their social status as well as bringing them a sense of belonging in a modern community.

EXPERIENCE OF CELLPHONE USE: SELECTED CASES

The individual interviews discussed below examine the ways in which people use cellphones and the effects the technology has on it users. The interviews asked people how they use cellphones (1) at work and in maintaining existing relationships, as well as (2) for popularity and the construction new identities/ statuses. The researcher interviewed five key informants from each of four different social groups (villagers, college students, government officials, monks).

These interviews reveal how technology increasingly but also differently shapes people's practices in traditional or modern ways. Although each group has different concerns and interests, everyone uses cellphones instrumentally and to extend their network. For this reason we must examine how users adapt this technology for their own needs.

The use of cellphone among villagers

Doubenjia is a 33 year-old villager. He got his cellphone three years ago and is the only one who has a cellphone in his family. His family is hoping to purchase one more cellphone soon. When asked why he needs a cellphone, Doubenjia replies:

> I think it provides many conveniences for my work. For instance, when I have an emergency, I can quickly arrange for the proper assistance. Secondly, it is also useful for my business. I am a herdsman and need to obtain a good price for my sheep. I can contact my dealer and we can negotiate directly. It also helps me to finish my tasks in a shorter time. In the past, whenever I took my sheep to the market, the merchants fix their prices at a very low rate because they know I cannot take them back to my distant pasture. Thirdly, my cellphone is also good for

contacting my friends. If I need to meet one of my friends, we can arrange for a certain time and place to meet. In the past, if I want to meet someone, we needed to wait for long periods (translated from Tibetan).

According to Doubenjia, the cellphone helps him at work as well as expands his social and business networks. Indeed, the advent of cellphones has contributed to the reorganization of work and leisure. It has created instant meeting places, with more accuracy and mobility. Doubenjia also says that the cellphone brings a sense of belongingness in the community. He continues:

> Nowadays, people imitate each other. If I have cellphone my neighbor and friends also want to have cellphones in order to communicate more effectively.

Apart from using cellphones as above, they also use it for discussing village matters and issues related to farming and herding. Additionally, as mentioned, owing a cellphone raises their social status among villagers.

The concept of popular culture among students

Lu defines Chinese popular culture as follows: it refers to the beliefs and practices, and objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population. This includes folk beliefs, practices and objects rooted in local traditions, and mass beliefs, practices and objects generated in political and commercial centers (Lu 2001).

In China, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, popular culture expanded significantly and brought a way of life that differed from either the official discourse of the party or the practices of the educated elite. More and more people started to wear jeans, listen to popular songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan, read romances by Qiong Yao, and watched foreign movies. These new forms of practice and information came from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the West, and have been significantly adapted and practiced among Chinese people (Sheldon 2001). More importantly, it opened up choices for people to select their own favorite music, dress styles and forms of leisure. The expansion of popular culture has given Tibetans more lifestyle choices than hitherto available.

Needless to say, popular culture has always existed in Tibet like in any society. However, earlier popular culture usually took official and bureaucratic forms of development and adaptation among the masses. For instance, popular songs and movies from Western countries, which have been popularized among Chinese, have been slowly practiced among Tibetans. This is also true for commodities such as new fashionable clothes, songs, and movies that are imported from Western countries. In a sense, there are two types of concepts which construct the understanding of popular culture. One is the external forces of cultural adaptation such as media, materials and commodities from outside of one's own community and gradually adapted and popularized among the population. The

other concept for popular culture is the internal forces of cultural practice which have been radically changed and popularized within a certain community, like songs and clothes that have been popular among Tibetans.

In the Tibetan community, the externally introduced popular culture seems more appreciated among young people. The following case shows that among students, cellphones are used not just as a communication tool, but for fashion. Zhaxijiancuo (18 years old) is a high school student, and when asked why he needs a cellphone, he says:

> Most all of my classmates have cellphones, and I also feel I need one. Besides talking and sending messages through the cellphone, I can download music and take pictures because of its multiple functions. So I do not need to buy CD-player and camera. And I think having a cellphone becomes one basic need in school life. You can play games, take pictures, and even make a video (translated from Tibetan).

As the consequence of globalization, many new products now flood the local market. People's idea of consumption encourages the accumulation of foreign goods and trends. Young Tibetans tend to adapt these new trends in fashion, songs and films. For example, the popularization of the cellphone is more observable among students, rather than among ordinary villagers and monks. The concept of popular culture is also much stronger among students. Students use cellphones not only for communicating with teachers and classmates but also as a fashion statement. They use it for taking short videos, pictures, and listening to popular songs. They also decorate their cellphones, download Tibetan songs for their ring tones, and choose lucky numbers for their permanent phone numbers. These are good examples in which this device has become the embodiment and symbol of social interaction, rather than simply a medium through which information is communicated.

The construction of cellphone language by government officials

According to Pertierra (2006), in modern societies literacy replaced orality as the main source of information. Oral exchanges or face-to-face conversations are no longer considered the main mode for the transmission of information and knowledge. Thus, orality and its forms of interaction tend to become restricted to private and domestic concerns. However, orality still plays a key role in the exchange ideas and information in Tibetan community. This was emphasized by many key informants who stressed the importance of face-to-face communication. This is one major reason why people use cellphones for voice calls rather than send text messages. This is particularly true among ordinary villagers and monks who can not read and write Chinese characters. Nonetheless, the practice of orality using a cellphone is a new phenomenon where people communicate differently compared to face-to-face interaction.

According to Giddens (1990), *talk* refers to concrete social activity in which

people participate in daily life, whereas *writing* lacks the complexity of interactions and occurs without certain conditions involving co-presence. This lack of co-presence limits the communicative potential of writing when compared to talk (Mark 1990). Furthermore, the absence of a partner (and its replacement by a reader) in writing shifts identity from performance to authorship. In computer-mediated communication, language use is radically separated from biographical identity. Language is thereby strongly anchored in the sphere of the social and its complexity is related less with its internal structure than with its complex social interactions. Cellphone conversation indicates this complex interaction where the talk is conducted in the physical absence of the interlocutor.

The use of cellphones among government officers varies according to their employment. Among the respondents who are government officers, two are school instructors, one official assistant, one hospital nurse, and one censor in County Bureau of Inquisition. Caiyanglamao is a nurse in the county hospital, and she is 26 years old. She said she needs a cellphone in order to get connected with her parents back in the village. And most importantly she uses her cellphone to arrange consultation times between the doctor and the patient. As she describes:

> Well, I think the cellphone makes my work easier in terms of time and communication. Now I can easily contact my patients in case I need to talk to them. I can quickly contact the doctors when there is an emergency. So it is useful and sufficient in my work as a nurse (translated from Tibetan).

These officials tend to use cellphones for organizing their regular tasks in the office such as arranging meetings and organizing appointments. Furthermore, the conversation or talk conducted through cellphones has introduced new forms of language etiquette among government officials. The voice of their conversation is usually characterized by the different social status (e.g. the highness or lowness of voice, using formal and polite words in conversing, among others). The Tibetan comedy *Phone,* which was played by famous Tibetan artist Malayjyap dealt with cellphone language and its related construction of multiple identities among Tibetans. A cellphone language is the way of speaking which people use for cellphone talk. It may play the function of writing in terms of the absent presence of co-presence in a particular setting. Nonetheless, it is different compared to written or spoken language (face-to-face conversation). In the case of the cellphone language, the way of communicating is much more reflexive and complex, especially when talking to someone who is socially identified in high positions like government leaders, and professors.

Usually when people are seen as lower class like the ordinary villagers, their way of talking to officials using the cellphone takes a distinct form— employing words, tones and euphemisms not usually used in face-to-face communication. Therefore, the emergence of the cellphone language

does not refer only about people talking in different ways but also about people constructing multiple identities towards others who hold different social positions in society.

Cellphone use in Tibetan monasteries

It is debatable whether monks should use cellphones in the monastery since some monasteries in other regions prohibit their use. According to Laneba Yeshisangbao, 38 years old and a teacher in the monastery:

> Generally it was not strict in the monastery, but it is not allowed for monks to use their cellphones in public places like chanting halls or public debate places. These days more and more monks have their own cellphones, so there is no strict rule that monks can not use cellphones in both their public and private life (translated from Tibetan).

Nonetheless, the key informants in this study claimed that it is fair that monks use cellphones in their monastic life. Moreover, they said that through using the cellphone they can regularly contact their relatives and friends in their home village. They also use cellphones to contact motorcycle drivers to arrange a ride to the town. Monks use cellphones to communicate with their fellow monks, organize teachings, arrange meetings, and ask help from each other. Laneba Yeshisangbao describes the use of cellphone in his daily work:

> In the past, occasionally monks need to go to other villages for religious rituals and funeral attendance. However, with a cellphone I think

monks will not go as far away as they used to in the past. So now, instead of going somewhere, the monks receive calls (either good or bad) from families, who often live far away, request them to pray or practice some rituals to ensure their good fortune. I am not saying the monks now are not visiting other villages but recently their visits have declined (translated from Tibetan).

Most importantly, using the cellphone enhances the communication between villagers and monks. Nowadays, villagers directly talk to monks about their concerns and spiritual needs. Furthermore, instead of going to the village or community, monks practice some religious rituals in the monastery (e.g. chanting, good harvest ritual, etc). Cellphones allow monks to hear from villagers without leaving the monastery. They can perform the necessary rituals in the monastery rather than having to go to the villages for their performance. The use of cellphone in organizing religious teachings and practices by monks results in a wider communication network involving village and monastery. Monastic life can take on a different tempo following the use of cellphones. Its activities are more concentrated within rather than outside the monastery.

Cellphone use in different social groups

Cellphone uses of the different social groups obtained from interviews are summarized in table 1:

Table 1:   Cellphone Use in Different Occupational Categories

Occupational Categories	The Different Way of Using Cellphones
Students	Cellphone use among students is more likely for entertainment or popular events (e.g. taking pictures, downloading songs, choosing lucky numbers, decorating their cellphones, etc.). The device becomes the physical appearance of showing fashion and social interactions.
Villagers	They use cellphones for maintaining relations with kin and friends. They also use it for discussing village matters, and issues related to farming and herding. Moreover, owing a cellphone promotes their social status among villagers, and it brings a sense of belongingness to a particular social network within which they interact.
Monks	The use of cellphones in organizing religious teachings and practices by monks results in a wider connectivity between village and monastery. Rituals normally performed in the village are increasingly performed in the monastery per cellphone requests.
Government Officials	Cellphone use introduces different bureaucratic discourses among government officials. The voice of their conversation is usually characterized by the different social status (e.g. if someone talking to his/her boss, s/he talks with lower voice, using formal and polite words to talk to their boss, and vice versa). Cellphones generates novel forms of bureaucratese.

The use of cellphone in public spaces

The boundary between spatial location and talk has diminished because of cellphones. People are no longer constrained by the spatial distance in communicating and exchanging ideas. The use of cellphone in public spaces creates distinct localities in which people are simultaneously interacting while communicating with different people. Cellphone use in public spaces can be said to privatize public space since it turns this space into private talk.

In this study, the researcher employed observational study of cellphone use in a number of public settings: classrooms, monasteries, shopping areas, public halls, working places, restaurants, and bus stations. The primary interest of this part of the study is in the social and physical constraints which shape cellphone use and behavior. Cellphone use in certain public spaces could be understood as the reconstruction of the public and the private sphere, wherein a normally private activity could be brought into public domain such as talking about personal issues in classrooms or monasteries, or likewise to bring about public concerns for private interest such as receiving public announcement or praying for private beliefs.

In Tibet, it is clear that the use of the cellphone brings private communications to public spaces whenever cellphone conversations are conducted in restaurants, classrooms, and even

monasteries. The distinction between the private and the public sphere are intertwined in public settings. The notion of the public realm, especially in terms of involving public affairs, and public practices has received little attention in Tibetan society. Usually within the family, there is little emphasis on privacy and individuation. People are generally more interested in domestic matters than they are in public concerns. The separation of the private sphere, with its distinct values and norms, from the public sphere is less developed in Tibetan society than in the West.

The construction of time and space

Through ICT, information can now be instantly transferred from one side of the world to the other (Poster 1990). In this complex communication system, cellphones assist the intensification of communication within existing social networks. However, the notions of time and space appear vague and unclear in a Tibetan context. The construction of time and space were usually conceived or understood by their physical or natural characteristics. Working space and working time often interpenetrated and were difficult to separate in a Tibetan community. Using cellphones constructs new notions of time and space where people interact independently of place and activity. People use cellphones to arrange a specific time and place for meetings and other activities, thus giving these notions a more interpretive and constructed nature. They become abstract concepts within which place and time can be reconstructed according to specific needs and interests. This saves both money and resources for other activities such as rituals. As mentioned earlier, cellphones have altered the tempo of spatio-temporal interaction in Tibetan monasteries. They have intensified ritual life and allowed for more specialized practices hitherto requiring extensive travel for their performance.

Summary

Through the investigation of cellphone use in the daily practices of Tibetans, the most frequent and obvious observations are (a) keeping traditional relations and extending social networks within and outside the community, (b) the construction of new identities, (c) the emergence of popular culture, (d) the distinction between the domestic and public spheres. The data also indicate that the use of the cellphone assists economic mobility and productivity even if these gains are still too fragile to propel social development.

CONCLUSION

The rapid economic growth of China shifted people from rural areas into more centralized and integrated urban settings. The combination of different communities into the specialized urban city is the main characteristic of development in China. Nevertheless, the level of urban development varies in terms of its location, economic development, and political conditions.

In China, there are 55 ethnic groups but one major group, the Han Chinese are dominant. Most ethnic groups are

located in the Western part of China, such as Tibet, Mongolia, and Urger. The development of Western China is very different from that taking place in eastern coastal areas of China. In the early 1970s until the late 1980s, the government had focused on the development of the coastal regions. The disparity between Western and the coastal regions has increased. As a consequence, the government announced a policy to develop the neglected western regions such as Tibet. Presently, the development in the coastal areas in China is still much more advanced than in the western regions. This imbalance is particularly significant in the ICT sector. However, there are attempts to redress this imbalance and telecommunication companies are now being established in the towns and cities of Tibet.

The public and private sphere

Due to the growing importance of the modern mass media, there are closer links between urban areas and rural villages. Generally, public affairs involve the politics of the elite, while the private sphere is still dominated by the family. The Tibetan family plays a major role as the basic source of income and information. Within the family, the interest of the individual is mainly absorbed into the interests of the kin group. The presence of cellphones has given the private sphere broader social networks and also facilitated the development of individual interests and values. This has led to the greater separation of the public from the private sphere as well as a greater emphasis on the former over the latter, at least among educated urban dwellers. This growing interest in public affairs is encouraged by the spread of popular culture. As noted earlier, popular culture is also shifting its emphasis from elite interests to mass appeal.

The mass media and telecommunications usually stress the relevance of the public sphere, even as they comment on domestic matters. Moreover, the public sphere emphasizes the imperatives of social and political development over domestic interests. In Tibet, as in most parts of the world, people believe that science and technology can bring about an improvement of everyday life. Modern communicative technologies reinforce people's beliefs in the ameliorative capacities of science and technology. But many of these technologies are usually imposed from above through government instrumentalities rather than through people's everyday interests. Cellphones are a strong exception since their popularity often stems from the practical needs of ordinary people. This technology can be seen as an expression of interests from below rather than an imposition from above.

Tibetan individualism

The notion of culture takes a specific meaning for modernity. Culture denotes a human activity through which people develop their skills, knowledge, and techniques in order to control nature. It is deliberately self conscious as opposed to traditional behavior which does not

question previous structures. The rise of individualism and self-understanding are the most salient elements of modernity. According to Maria R. Markus (2002), traditional culture is rooted directly in the form of life into which one is born. Modernity assesses these life forms for its suitability in contemporary conditions. Moreover, culture also refers to a more abstract level such as beliefs, norms, and organized practices.

In Tibetan society, many traditional practices and rituals are heavily embedded in everyday life. It is very important to have a strong sense of collective life in order to appreciate the values of responsibility and social justice. Traditional Tibetan culture does not emphasize the concepts of the individual and of privacy. In rural areas, all the family members live together in one room, and hence there is little scope for the concepts of individuality or privacy. In this context, the cellphone is not only primarily a communication tool but also an agent for generating notions of individuality and privacy. The cellphone has created a private space hitherto lacking in Tibetan life. For this reason we may expect the notion of individualism to gain increasing acceptability within local society.

Modernity and Tibetan society

In the era of modernity, we seem to have arrived at a new age where everything has multiple reflexive meanings. What does it mean to be modern? The term in itself reflects the consciousness of time and space in a different manner than pursued in the past.

What we have understood and taken for granted for centuries now has to be justified in instrumental or practical grounds. The rationalization of everyday life proceeds as globalization exerts its influence over greater aspects of Tibetan life. People no longer respect many traditional narratives and norms as sufficient for living in modern society. The break with earlier providential views of history, the present reflexive and dynamic social institutions, the dissolution of foundationalism and the emergence of future-oriented thought are the distinguishable features of modernity. The transformation of the traditional social order into the multidimensional modern social institutions is a major aspect of modernity. People begin to trust each other through modern social institutions rather than kinship or family ties. Although these radical changes are not yet fully achieved in Tibetan society, the increasing numbers of cellphone and Internet users are a major indication that these changes are well on their way. These new forms of technology, including changes in popular culture have an enormous impact on people's culture and social change.

These social phenomena associated with modernity have largely been introduced from above via the appropriate governmental institutions. They have encountered some opposition from the grassroots where village life and traditional culture has a stronger hold. In many Tibetan communities, people still live in mountain areas where they have no access to modern services such as media, education, and hygiene. People's

sense of trust and the routines of everyday life are still based on kinship and locality. For them, the family and the local community are the major social bases of daily life.

Cellphones have extended the social network of traditional relationships among Tibetans. The reasons for possessing a cellphone and the ways in which individuals use them differ according to their age, social class, and gender. Among young students, cellphones serve as an index of popularity and a symbol of fashion, whereas villagers and government officers tend to see it more instrumentally. Using cellphones for sending text messages are more appreciated by those who can read and write Chinese.   While men own the majority of cellphones among villagers, among students and government officers, gender is less important as women also acquire them. The use of cellphones among Buddhist monks and nuns is still controversial even as more monasteries accept its limited use. In monasteries which accept its use, there appears to be a shift of rituals from outside to inside the monastery. The cellphone has become a major topic of theological dispute among Buddhist monks. These disputes have raised fundamental questions about the relationship between Buddhism and modernity.

The extent to which cellphone use is influenced by commercial forces or state intervention is unclear in this research. The market and the state are major players in this game but Tibetans also act as important agents in its resolution and development. A major question remains: How do information and communication technologies construct social identities among Tibetans? Does cellphone use in the private sphere gradually affect and change the public sphere? Does the cellphone contribute to the overall development of Tibetan communities? This study of Tibetan mobile phone use offers some lessons. It enriches our understanding of the diversity of its global users. It adds detail to this diversity of use in local communities. But to effectively understand the role of mobile phones in society, it is important to study these technologies in their entire social, cultural, political and economic contexts.

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