

# The 'Mobile' Face of Contemporary China

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The adoption and diffusion of the mobile phone has been exceptionally rapid in Mainland China, especially in its capital Beijing and the coastal industrialized towns. With almost half a billion mobile phones, China has rapidly become the biggest market for this technology and one of the world's leading nations in the production of information and communication technologies. In the last years also the amount of qualitative research devoted to ICTs in China is increased, while that of quantitative studies is still limited. This paper describes a quantitative research study, specifically focused on the appropriation and domestication of the mobile phone in China. On the basis of questionnaires that were personally administered to a convenient sample of 487 respondents, the design of this research attempts to answer the following research question: How the relational sphere in China is reshaped by the massive use of the mobile phone? And then are there striking differences between the attitudes, behaviours and practices associated with mobile phone use in China and in the West?



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This is a very broad research topic, but in this paper we confine our examination to the social implications of the mobile phone use on some aspects of the relational sphere. A convenience sample of 487 respondents can hardly provide a basis for generalizations about the Chinese population as a whole. However, the results of this study will serve to indicate the most important patterns of mobile phone use, which would be a fruitful subject for future research. Thus the data presented here will provide the direction for further inquiries into various aspects of mobile phone use in China.

## China's Position at the Crossroads of Industrialization, Technology, and Modernity

Sombart (1911) argued that each culture adapts technology to the context of its daily life. But what does this mean in the case of China, a country with a culture that differs strikingly from its Western counterpart? How is new technology such as the mobile phone appropriated and domesticated in China? The effects of technological advances are widely studied in the West, but this research is not necessarily applicable to China. Why did the mobile phone, in particular, become so immediately and widely popular among the Chinese? Why is a mobile phone so attractive that Chinese men and women are willing to spend one to three months' wages to own one?

With almost half a billion mobile phones, China is now the biggest market for this technology and has become one of the world's leading ICT nations in the production of information and communication technologies. China is a recently industrialized country; its rate of development is very high in comparison to countries where industrialization is well established. It is a country where the diffusion, use, and appropriation of technology, especially information and communication technology, play a strategic role in the

development of production systems (Weber, 2003). Industrialization and technology are inextricably bound with another element: modernity (Ferrarotti, 1970; Giddens, 1991a, 1991b). By "modernity" we refer to the radical changes these new developments effect in social structures, the configuration of social relationships, and the perception of self, which result in the reshaping of the material and immaterial organization of the domestic sphere and civil society. Generally, the success of a technological device depends on its ability to make people believe that it will help them to deal with these changes. Technology and modernity are therefore closely interconnected (Law & Du, forthcoming).

In the last years the amount of qualitative research devoted to ICTs in China is increased (Law & Peng, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2007; Fortunati & Yang, forthcoming; Yang, 2005), while that of quantitative studies is still limited. Here we present a quantitative research study, specifically focused on the phenomenon of the mobile phone.<sup>1)</sup>

In this paper we address research questions related to the relational sphere of the mobile phone and to users' attitudes towards the device. We will pay particular attention to the investigation of how the



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<sup>1)</sup> We have already used the data collected during the research to analyse the importance of this device for the Chinese people, particularly its roles in increasing social connectivity, enhancing the sphere of communication, and reshaping emotional distance (Fortunati, Manganelli, Law, & Yang, 2008) and also to examine common characteristics of mobile phone use, such as familiarity, motivation, communicative means (calling and sending SMS), SMS content, and mobile functions (Fortunati, Manganelli, Law, & Yang, 2007).

mobile is now shaping the social structure of interpersonal relationships in China and how gender differences are articulated. Doing so, we will probably be able to reach a deeper understanding of how Chinese read and interpret this device and which meaning they attribute to the mobile phone as an instrument of social mediation. Furthermore, we will be able to understand some particular features of the digital divide in China as well as the complex role of the mobile phone in immigrants' everyday life.

On the basis of questionnaires personally administered to a convenient sample of 487 respondents, this study investigates the following areas: the identity of the main recipient of calls, the frequency of mobile communicative exchanges, the type of contact (calls or SMS), the nature of SMS content, the respondents' attitudes towards the increasing complexity of the mobile phone, the respondents' passive or active approach to mobile communication, the advantages and disadvantages of the mobile phone, and possible substitutions for the device. Of course, a convenience sample of 487 respondents can hardly provide a basis for generalizations about the Chinese population as a whole. However, the results of the research suggest the most important patterns of the mobile phone use, which should be examined in further research. Thus the data presented here is intended to provide a starting point for a more in-depth inquiry into various aspects of the mobile phone use in China.

## Aim and Method

The purpose of the study is broad, and covers a number of aspects of the appropriation and domestication of the mobile phone in China. In this paper, however, we will confine ourselves to the specific issues identified in the previous section. The data were collected during personally administered surveys conducted in March 2006 in Beijing. The demographic variables included in the research were gender, age, education, income, and place of origin (rural or urban). The participants were Beijing inhabitants: 280 males (57.5 %) and 207 females (42.5 %). The respondents' ages varied from 15 to 60, but the large majority of the sample (86 %) were under 30. Almost half were born in rural areas. Nearly a quarter had only basic education (secondary school); one-fifth had mid-level education (high school or some years of college); and more than half had at least one university degree. With respect to income, 21.6 % had no income; 30.6 % earned 1000 RMB or more per month; 34.3 %, from 1001 to 4000 RMB; and 13.1 %, 4000 RMB.<sup>2)</sup>

## Results

People who use the mobile phone as a means of conducting their interpersonal relationships end up reshaping their social sphere. Since the phone allows users to be highly selective, they are able to shape the relational sphere in a rigid and self-determined way. Therefore, the first question of the survey was as follows: "Which interpersonal relationships are included in the social sphere maintained by your mobile phone?" We know that not all interpersonal relationships involve the same degree of mobile phone use. There are relationships that encourage only sporadic mobile phone use, and others that rely on it heavily. Table 1 illustrates this situation.

The table provides several insights into the structure of relational spheres in Beijing today. First, the mobile phone mediates in a different measure the different relationships. Almost half of our respondents use the mobile phone to sustain friendship and keep in touch with schoolmates. This type of relationship is the most "mobile" because it is the most fluid, flexible, and equal. In particular, the schoolmate represents a very important relationship in Chinese culture and is like an old friend that one knows since many years. Second, the mobile is not primarily used in the sphere of family relationships. Within families, it is more often used as a means of communication between husbands and wives than between parents and children (21.8 % and 15 %, respectively). It acts more horizontally than vertically. Colleagues (12.3 %) are in fourth place as recipients of mobile calls. Mobile phones are very seldom used to contact people from one's hometown (though a relationship

Recipient	Frequency	Percentage
Your friends or schoolmates	199	40.9
Your partner	106	21.8
Parents, children, or other relatives	73	15.0
Your colleagues or other working partners	60	12.3
Persons from your hometown	2	0.4
Others	11	2.2
N.A.	36	7.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>487</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 1 Most frequent recipients of mobile phone calls

<sup>2)</sup> One euro is about 10 RMB.

Interlocutors	Frequency of contacts					
	Many times a day	Once a day	Many times a week	Once a week	Not often	N.A.
Partner	155 31.8 %	54 11.1 %	46 9.4 %	16 3.3 %	36 7.4 %	180 37.0 %
Parents, children or other relatives	39 8.0 %	49 10.1 %	160 32.9 %	143 29.4 %	69 14.2 %	27 5.5 %
Friends and schoolmates	118 24.2 %	26 5.3 %	155 31.8 %	53 10.9 %	104 21.4 %	31 6.4 %
Persons from your hometown	13 2.7 %	9 1.8 %	49 10.1 %	39 8.0 %	241 49.5 %	136 27.9 %
Colleagues	113 23.2 %	30 6.2 %	128 26.3 %	32 6.6 %	100 20.5 %	84 17.2 %

This table is built with the results of several frequency tables. Here we do not report the answers to the item "others".

Table 2 Frequency of mobile contact with different typologies of interlocutors

with one's birthplace has been historically very important for Chinese people). Only two respondents indicated that they called inhabitants of their hometown on their mobile phone. Probably the costs due to distance, in addition to technological annoyances and other psychological and communicative factors discourage the use of the mobile phone with hometown acquaintances.

In the organization of their mobile communicative sphere, men and women differ only insofar as the men are more inclined than women to contact a colleague by means of a mobile phone (18.4 % and 6.6 %, respectively).<sup>3)</sup> Age also plays a part in mobile phone use: those who are between 26 and 30 with a mid-level education are more apt to contact their colleagues by means of this device, while those under 25 are the most likely to use it to contact their friends or schoolmates. This suggests that the former group is obliged to devote more time to work problems and relationships with colleagues. For this group in particular, the mobile phone is a crucial work tool. Well-educated respondents follow another pattern; they are more inclined to use the mobile to work out their interpersonal relationships. In fact, these respondents make half of their mobile calls to friends and a third to their partners. Other patterns are created by income level: 68.8 % of those with no income contact friends, while people with an income above 1000 RMB are more likely to call their colleagues. Finally, with respect to geographical origin, it appears that urbanites are more likely to nurture sentimental rela-

tionships by means of the mobile phone than those with a rural background. The majority of respondents who contact their partner via the mobile phone came from the city. The relational spheres of the respondents, as shown by the frequency of their contacts with friends and schoolmates, partners, relatives, colleagues, and persons from own hometown are illustrated in Table 2.

It is worth noting that our respondents use the mobile with varying frequency depending on the nature of their relationship with the recipient. Our question was "How often do you contact these people below with the mobile phone?" Respondents had to answer on a five point scale which was as follows: 1 = not often, 2 = once a week, 3 = many times a week, 4 = once a day, 5 = several times a day. Partners are the people that our respondents contact most intensively: almost a third of the respondents declare that they call them many times a day. The number of no answers, however, is very high; 37.0 %, probably because many of the respondents do not have a partner. We recall that only a quarter of our sample is married, while 73.5 % have never been married. There are many things that couples need to regulate and co-ordinate; more importantly, the calls give them an opportunity to express their feelings and experiences. The lower frequency of calls is evident in the relationship between parents and children; 62.3 % of respondents indicate an obligatory call once or more times in a week. This is the relationship where the mobile phone plays the least critical role, because when parents and children

<sup>3)</sup> Gender:  $\chi^2_{(4)} = 16.24, p < 0.01$ ; age:  $\chi^2_{(12)} = 83.64, p < 0.0001$ ; education:  $\chi^2_{(8)} = 59.08, p < 0.0001$ ; income:  $\chi^2_{(12)} = 77.47, p < 0.0001$ ; geographical origin:  $\chi^2_{(4)} = 10.36, p < 0.05$ .

Means	Partner	Parents, children or other relatives	Friends and schoolmates	Colleagues
Calling	126 25.9 %	368 75.6 %	80 16.4 %	163 33.5 %
Sending an SMS	131 26.9 %	41 8.4 %	300 61.6 %	109 22.4 %
Varies according to context and situations	55 11.3 %	46 9.4 %	73 15.0 %	134 27.5 %
N.A.	175 35.9 %	32 6.5 %	34 6.9 %	81 16.6 %

This table is built with the results of several contingency tables.

Table 3 The means of contact

no longer live together, they need to have a regular, but not too frequent, contact to reassure one another that they are doing well. Contact with friends or schoolmates and contact with colleagues are equally frequent, since the modal class of answers in both cases is many times a week. However, there is friendship and friendship. Our respondents in fact use the mobile phone to mediate this kind of relationship in an articulate way; nearly a quarter of them say that they contact their friends and/or schoolmates many times a day, while almost a fifth declare that they do not call them often. The same trend is shown also by work relationship with the difference that in this case no answers are higher, probably because not all the respondents have work relationship. The survey indicated that the mobile phone acts as an important means of conducting work relationships. In the end, the modal class in the frequency with which respondents use the mobile phone to contact persons from their hometown is “not often” and with a high percentage of no answers. This result reconfirms the evanescence of this type of relationship in mobile communication.

Not surprisingly, we found differences based on gender: women are more frequent callers of partners, parents/children, and friends/ schoolmates, while men show a greater tendency to call colleagues.<sup>4)</sup> In

China, as in many societies in the West, there is a gender division of labour regarding the maintenance of social relationships. Maintaining social bonds is a woman’s task, part of the domestic sphere, while cultivating work relationships is more likely to be undertaken by men. There are slight differences based on geographical origin: those with urban backgrounds made more calls to partners, parents/children, and friends/schoolmates, but they called colleagues at the same rate as respondents with a rural background.<sup>5)</sup> It seems that it is especially the domestic sphere to be more solicited on a communication level by the urban culture. The only significant differences related to age were in the frequency with which our respondents call friends/schoolmates and colleagues.<sup>6)</sup> Not surprisingly, young respondents (25 and under) have more frequent communications with friends and schoolmates, while more mature respondents are more likely to call their colleagues. Education influences only the frequencies with which respondents contact partners and friends/schoolmates: the higher the educational level, the more likely it is that there are frequent calls to partners and friends.<sup>7)</sup> Income plays a role too: people with higher incomes tend to have a wider variety of recipients.<sup>8)</sup> These results mean that the possibility to keep alive personal networks does not pass only through a personal, psycho-

4) All the comparisons reported in the text have been executed on average scores which have been calculated by considering a five point scale from 1 = not often to 5 = many times a day. For partners:  $t_{(305)} = -3.09$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; parents/children:  $t_{(458)} = -3.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; friends/schoolmates:  $t_{(454)} = -2.38$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; colleagues:  $t_{(401)} = 2.56$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

5) For partners:  $t_{(303)} = 3.64$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ; parents/children:  $t_{(455)} = 4.67$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ; friends/schoolmates:  $t_{(451)} = 3.49$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

6) Univariate Anova with factor between frequency of contact with friends/schoolmates:  $F_{(3,451)} = 25.87$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ; with colleagues:  $F_{(3,398)} = 3.73$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

7) Univariate Anova with factor between frequency of contact with partner:  $F_{(2,303)} = 10.54$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ; with friends/schoolmates:  $F_{(2,452)} = 14.65$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ .

8) Univariate Anova with factor between frequency of contact with partner:  $F_{(3,301)} = 7.67$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ; with parents/children:  $F_{(3,454)} = 4.02$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; with friends/schoolmates:  $F_{(3,450)} = 16.71$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ; with colleagues:  $F_{(3,397)} = 5.89$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

logical ability, but it is connected also to these socio-demographic variables.

Another significant finding, which sheds light on the relational spheres of the respondents, is the number of people who our respondents contact by means of the mobile phone. The average for the sample is 17.32 (s.d. 31.81) per person. The men had more contacts than the women ( $M = 20.36$  and  $13.32$ , respectively).<sup>9)</sup> There were no differences between respondents born outside Beijing and those born in the city. Among the other socio-demographic variables, only education and income are significant factors:<sup>10)</sup> people with a mid-level education contact more people ( $M = 27.46$ ) than those with other levels of education, and people with high or middle incomes have the largest number of mobile phone contacts ( $M = 21.40$  and  $22.23$ , respectively).

Let us look now at the means of the contact, since the form of communication (calling or sending an SMS) provides insight into the content of various social relationships (see Table 3).

The table shows that each type of relationship is associated with a certain means of mobile contact. With parents or children, it is almost always a phone call. Parents and children communicate by means of the voice, even when relying on technology. Recourse to SMS is very limited, and in less than 10 % of cases the decision to use one means or the other depends on the context or situation. Friends and schoolmates communicate mainly through SMS and only sometimes by calling. The choice of means in these relationships is more sensitive to different contexts and situations (15 %). The relationship with partners inhabits an area between those with parents/children and those with friends. In the case of partners, both means of communication – calling and sending SMS – are used in equal measure. Also the effect of context and situation on the means of communication is not as limited as it is for parents/children and not as significant as it is for friends. Finally, contact with colleagues is more likely to be a call than an SMS, and the effect of context and situation is much more crucial (27.5 %). Vertical relationships, that is, relationships based on a difference of power, such as those between parents and children and between dif-

ferent levels of personnel, seem to require the spoken word, while horizontal relationships, such as those between friends and partners, encourage uninhibited writing.

We will examine each type of social relationship, in turn, to determine the weight of each socio-demographic variable in each framework. In relationships with partners, the means of contact by mobile phone varies, revealing different styles of communication.<sup>11)</sup> While men's behaviour is not different from women's, age is relevant. More than a third of the respondents under 20 use SMS to communicate with their partners, whereas 59.7 % of those between 31 and 60 years make calls. Also education shapes the means of communicating with a partner: 38.4 % of respondents with a low level of education rely on calls, while most well-educated respondents (72.7 %) exercise the prerogative to make a call or send an SMS according to different contexts and situations.

Income also affects the likelihood of calling: respondents who earn between 1000 and 3000 RMB significantly more than the others do so. In relationships with parents/children, men are more likely than women to call their parents or children rather than sending an SMS (83.7 % and 75.0 %, respectively).<sup>12)</sup> Those who earn less than 1000 RMB are more likely to call parents/children (87 %). Respondents who were raised in the city are more likely to send an SMS than those with a rural background (12.6 % and 5.3 %, respectively), which leads to the corollary that those with rural backgrounds are more likely to call than urbanites (84.5 % and 75.8 %, respectively). In relationships with friends/schoolmates, men are more likely than women to call (24.6 % and 7.6 %, respectively); women are more apt to send SMS and to adapt the means of communication to circumstances and events.<sup>13)</sup> One-third of respondents between 31 and 60 years of age call their friends, while more than 70 % of respondents under 25 rely on SMS. Almost one-third of the respondents who earn over 1000 RMB make calls, while 82.2 % of those with no income use SMS. Finally, in relationships with colleagues, men are much more likely than women to make a call.<sup>14)</sup> Age introduces a dichotomy between young (under 25) and more mature (26 to 60) respondents: the former group is likely to send an SMS, the

9) Gender:  $t_{(457)} = 2.36, p < 0.05$ .

10) Univariate Anova with factor between education:  $F(2,455) = 6.16, p < 0.01$  and income:  $F(3,453) = 3.18, p < 0.05$ .

11) Age:  $\chi^2_{(6)} = 36.50, p < 0.0001$ ; education:  $\chi^2_{(4)} = 15.20, p < 0.01$ ; income:  $\chi^2_{(6)} = 14.45, p < 0.05$ .

12) Gender:  $\chi^2_{(2)} = 7.61, p < 0.05$ ; income:  $\chi^2_{(6)} = 14.48, p < 0.05$ ; geographical origin:  $\chi^2_{(2)} = 8.25, p < 0.05$ .

13) Gender:  $\chi^2_{(2)} = 25.79, p < 0.0001$ ; age:  $\chi^2_{(6)} = 39.35, p < 0.0001$ ; income:  $\chi^2_{(6)} = 39.34, p < 0.0001$ .

14) Gender:  $\chi^2_{(2)} = 16.19, p < 0.001$ ; age:  $\chi^2_{(6)} = 51.96, p < 0.0001$ ; education:  $\chi^2_{(4)} = 19.18, p < 0.001$ ; income:  $\chi^2_{(6)} = 45.63, p < 0.000$ ; geographical origin:  $\chi^2_{(2)} = 8.09, p < 0.05$ .

Type of use	Gender		Total
	Males	Females	
Giving a call	93 35.4 %	85 42.7 %	178 38.5 %
Receiving a call	70 26.6 %	31 15.6 %	101 21.9 %
Nearly half and half	100 38.0 %	83 41.7 %	183 39.6 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>462</b>

In this table, 25 N.A. are not reported.

Table 4 Giving or receiving calls: prevalent use of the mobile phone by gender

latter to make calls. More than half the respondents with a mid-level education are likely to use their mobile phone to call their colleagues, while more than a third of interviewees with a low level of education prefer to send an SMS. Among those who vary their means of contact on the basis of context and situation, 61.9 % are people with higher levels of education. Income also played a significant role in the responses. At least half of those with an income over 1000 RMB prefer to call, while a third of the respondents with no income adapt the means according to the circumstances. Respondents with urban backgrounds are more likely than those with rural backgrounds to vary the means according to the circumstances (32.9 % and 26.3 %, respectively). Respondents born outside the city prefer to send an SMS in 30.4 % of cases, but this is true of only 18.2 % of urbanites.

Another very important element to consider when determining the communication profile of a country and its organization of interpersonal relationships is people's attitude towards the two aspects of mobile communication: giving and receiving calls. If compared to body-to-body communication, mediated communication requires more cooperation between these two elements of the process, since the agents are separated by space and, in some instances, time as well. Of course, there are people who prefer to call and people who prefer to be called. These attitudes may be described as active or passive approaches to communication. However, the analysis of the passive/active attitude towards communication cannot simply be understood in a psychological or socio-demographic framework. Understanding the reasons for these patterns (in calling and being called) is com-

pllicated by the fact that communication is subjected to the social organization of power. In some situations, those with greater power assume the initiative to call and talk, and in others, they prefer to receive communications initiated by others. Furthermore, the organization of power leads to different patterns and rituality depending on the specific culture. In Beijing, we found that the percentage of respondents who claim that they usually give calls is higher compared to that of respondents who say that they usually receive calls (see Table 4).

So it appears our Chinese respondents see themselves as more active than passive in mobile communication. Considering this aspect from the perspective of gender allows us to understand how important ritual aspects of communication are organized in a country.<sup>15)</sup> In this survey, for example, there is a significant difference between men and women: women are more likely to take the initiative and make a call, opening up the communicative process. Men are more frequently the recipients of calls. This result may lead us to hypothesize that in Chinese culture power is identified with the capacity to attract communications from others, almost as a form of homage. But this hypothesis is weakened when we consider the effects of education. Respondents with a mid and high level education give more calls than they receive. Also respondents with urban backgrounds are more inclined to initiate a call than those with rural backgrounds (46.8 % and 30.1 %, respectively). These findings suggest that Chinese are proactive in communication and, on the whole, are more likely to take the communicative initiative than to await incoming calls that are perceived as a form of homage. The fact that women's calls are mainly related to interpersonal relationships in the domestic sphere provides additional support to the theory that social communication is part of their domestic role.

But what are the most crucial variables when it comes to accounting for the varying frequency of mobile calls to family, friends, and colleagues? To answer this question we ran a series of linear regression analyses: the dependent variable was the frequency of mobile contacts with specific typologies of interpersonal relationships. We used some socio-demographic variables as predictors, including gender (dummy variable 0 = M, 1 = F), urban/rural origin (dummy variable 0 = city, 1 = rural), age (measured in years), education, and income. We also included variables related to mobile phone practice, such as familiarity with the mobile phone (in years), quantity of calls made and messages sent with the mobile

<sup>15)</sup> Gender:  $\chi^2_{(2)} = 8.39, p < 0.05$ ; education:  $\chi^2_{(4)} = 10.35, p < 0.05$ ; geographical origin:  $\chi^2_{(2)} = 14.05, p < 0.0001$ .

<sup>16)</sup> We illustrated the results related to these variables in Fortunati, L, Manganelli, A, Law, P, Yang, S (2007).

	B	$\beta$	t	p <
Constant	3.53		6.09	.0001
Education	.09	.12	2.00	.05
Average number of SMS sent per day	.01	.17	3.02	.01
Income	.16	.26	3.92	.0001
Age	-.04	-.19	-3.00	.01
Gender	.36	.13	2.28	.05
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.14*			
N	285			
* p < .0001				

Table 5 Results of multiple regression analysis for frequency of mobile contacts with partners (stepwise method)

phone, and the range of social contacts maintained by this device.<sup>16)</sup> The results for mobile calls to a partner are shown in Table 5, to parents/children and other relatives in Table 6, to friends/schoolmates in Table 7, to colleagues in Table 8.

The regression analysis for the frequency of mobile contacts with partners revealed five significant predictors: four were socio-demographic and one was related to mobile phone practices (see Table 5). The main predictor was income. The number of contacts with partners increases with higher incomes. This is not surprising; affluent respondents can afford a higher frequency of communication because they can easily pay mobile fees. The frequency of contact increases as age decreases. This inverse relationship is also easily understandable: young people are at the stage of life when long-term relationships are established, so they dedicate more effort to communication. Furthermore, frequency of contacts is positively influenced by the practice of sending SMS. The more respondents are inclined to send an SMS, the more likely they are to call their partner regularly. Gender also plays a role: women are more likely to contact their partner than men. In China, as in the West, the responsibility to nurture sentimental relationships, to

co-ordinate daily activities, and to establish a domestic framework is shouldered primarily by women (Yuen, Law, & Ho, 2004). Finally, respondents with a high level of education are more likely to use the mobile phone to contact their partner. The cultivation of sentimental relationships through conversation is one of the consequences of a high level of education.

In the regression analysis for mobile contacts with parents/children or other relatives, the significant predictors were found to be geographical origin, gender, age, and the average number of SMS sent (see Table 6). Respondents born in rural areas were less inclined to contact parents/children than those born in city. Internal migration makes it more difficult to sustain family relationships due to the cost and to the fact that vertical communication tends to become more strained and, therefore, less frequent. In addition, as Law and Yang (2007) have observed, there have been changes in lifestyle among recent generations of immigrants, who are more likely to be consumers and less likely to send their money home to take care of their parents and children. The number of contacts increases with age. Youths wait for parents to initiate contact; they are eager to cut the umbilical cord that keeps them united to their families and,

	B	$\beta$	t	p <
Constant	1.95	7.28	.0001	
Geographical origin	-.36	-.16	-3.30	.01
Average number of SMS sent per day	.01	.13	2.68	.01
Age	.03	.14	2.86	.01
Gender	.28	.12	2.54	.05
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.07*			
N	426			
* p < .0001				

Table 6 Results of multiple regression analysis for frequency of mobile contacts with parents/children and other relatives (stepwise method)

	B	$\beta$	t	p <
Constant	3.69	9.41	.0001	
Age	-.05	-.21	-3.72	.0001
Education	.15	.18	4.05	.0001
Average number of SMS sent per day	.01	.16	3.47	.01
Income	-.11	-.17	-3.17	.01
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.17*			
N	422			
* p < .0001				

Table 7 Results of multiple regression analysis for frequency of mobile contacts with friends/schoolmates (stepwise method)

for this reason, they tend to call their parents less frequently. In contrast, parents try to sustain their relationship with their children and exert some control over their behaviour. The frequency of parent/child contacts is increased if the parties use SMS. The more inclined the respondents are to send an SMS, the more likely they are to contact their parents/children regularly. The SMS is, in this context, the ideal means to maintain a relationship: it provides communication but at a distance. Women are more frequent communicators than men, both as daughters and as mothers. However, we must underline that the effects of the independent variables that we have considered in this regression analysis, although they are significant, are weak, as is demonstrated by the low amount of variance of the dependent variable explained by the predictors.

In the regression analysis for mobile contacts with friends/schoolmates, the significant predictors were age, education, income, and the average number of SMS sent (see Table 7). With an increase in age, the likelihood of mobile contact decreased. This finding is not unexpected; as we age, we acquire more commitments and family/work responsibilities. This means we have less time to dedicate to friendships. The use of the mobile phone offers a good picture of this phenomenon. Education is a powerful ally of friendship: it offers reasons, motivations, and means to continue to stay in touch with friends. Education teaches the value of friendship, and the time we spend in school allows us to build friendships that may last for a lifetime. The higher the level of education, the more mobile contacts with friends and schoolmates. There are also correlations with income. But here we had an unexpected result. Research conducted in several Western societies shows that, in order to maintain friendships, it is necessary to invest money in means to stay in touch and meet (Allan, 1979). Money is required to access, maintain, and use mobile phones, computers, the Internet, and even the fixed telephone; it is also required for evenings at

restaurants or cinemas, etc. However, our research suggested the opposite. The less the respondents earn, the more likely they were to stay in contact with their friends and schoolmates. One reason may be that the mobile phone serves a very important function for the poorest respondents – it is a generator of employment information. Also, the frequency of friends/schoolmate contacts is positively influenced by SMS use. The more respondents use SMS, the more they stay in contact with their friends/schoolmates. The SMS seems in this context the ideal means to maintain a relationship without spending too much.

Finally, in the regression analysis for mobile contacts with colleagues, the significant predictors are the number of mobile calls made, familiarity with the mobile phone, and the largeness of the relational sphere maintained by this device (see Table 8). The predictors that explain the frequency of contact with colleagues are completely different from the predictors in other spheres. Here it is the number of calls that matters, not the frequency of SMS. Work requires a level of discretion that often makes written communication inadvisable. Such communication must be transitory in order not to leave traces; it needs a voice to express all the nuances necessary to deal with various power relationships. Furthermore, familiarity with the device is important, as people cannot risk embarrassing themselves with colleagues due to an inadequate knowledge of mobile phone use. The longer respondents had owned the device, the more intensively they used it to contact their colleagues. People who are familiar with the device demonstrate to their colleagues that they can manage technology efficiently. Finally, the largeness of the relational sphere plays a significant role. This variable acts as an index of empowerment: people who have a large number of contacts seem well connected.

At the end of this series of regression analyses, however, we have to note that in general the effects of the independent variables that we have considered are

	B	$\beta$	t	p <
Constant	2.19	14.24	.0001	
Average number of calls made per day	.04	.25	4.84	.0001
Familiarity with the device	.10	.18	3.63	.0001
Largeness of the relational sphere	.01	.10	2.06	.05
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.15*			
N	373			
* p < .0001				

Table 8 Results of multiple regression analysis for frequency of mobile contacts with colleagues (stepwise method)

significant but rather weak, as it is demonstrated by the more or less low amount of variance of the dependent variable explained by the predictors. This is a good reason to share with caution the interpretation of these effects, as other variables, different from those we considered here, concur to determine the frequency of mobile contacts with the various typologies of interpersonal interlocutors.

## Conclusion

In this paper we examined the structure and the characteristics of mobile phone behaviour among our Beijing respondents. Several patterns are similar to those found in many Western societies (Fortunati, Manganelli, 1998). But in at least two respects, the Chinese experience seems to be different. Our respondents in Beijing claim more contact with colleagues, which suggests that, for the Chinese, the mobile phone is perceived as a work tool as well as a social device. This result refers to a reading of the social meaning of the mobile phone which reveals a double identity – working and domestic. The mobile phone is a technology that in China seems to function as a communicative bridge between the place of work and the everyday life setting. Also, in China, the respondents who earned the least were the most likely to stay in contact with their friends and schoolmates via the mobile phone; this suggests that the device operates as a generator of social solidarity among peers and is, consequently, of particular value to the poorest respondents. This is in contrast to the situation in some Western countries, where the digital divide tends to affect people with low income and where moreover friendships generally are a “rare good” among people with low incomes (Allan, 1979; Fortunati, 1995). But this means also that it is probably from friendships, that is from strong ties, that the individuals received the precious information regarding employment. This result seems to be confirmed also by other research (Law & Peng, 2007). As for Chinese, no matter which levels of social strata they

are from, social ties are mainly polarized into either “insiders” or “outsiders.” Obviously, the ties among insiders are strong. Insiders are those they can lay their trust on, while outsiders are measured instrumentally (Metzger, 1998). And this again is different from many Western experiences, where, as Granovetter (1973, 1974) argues, the weakest ties are the most involved in helping to get a job.

There were not very significant differences found between men and women in this study, except that women’s social contacts are more likely to relate to the domestic environment and the men’s to the work world. And this lack of differences between men and women was unexpected in a country where power differences between men and women are still strong as the social structure is still patrilineal and hierarchical (Yuen, Law, Ho, 2004).

Finally, modernity in China has been achieved by the urbanization of millions of peasants. The development of the coastal cities has been achieved at high personal and social costs, which have been borne primarily by those with rural backgrounds (Chu & Yang, 2006). In addition to being uprooted from their home region, they encounter serious difficulties in the attempt to enter their new social sphere. Other research (Yang, forthcoming) have shown that, for instance, most of the migrant workers in Beijing working in the service industry do not have labour contracts, and it is very common for them to work overtime, have limited freedom, and have working and life spaces which overlap. The dwellings and the lives of the migrant workers Yang studied fill the crevices in the metropolis’ modern veneer. In some respects, the mobile phone supports their efforts to overcome these social, economic, and cultural difficulties. For example, again according to Yang (forthcoming), migrants use mobiles to avoid the boredom and restrictions of work; they use mobiles to keep connected to their friends, mitigating conflicts between economic and emotional necessities and

gathering more important job market information; through the use of mobile phones, they can increase the scope of their romantic choices. But the mobile phone does not serve to them to maintain the relationship with their place of origin by contacting persons from their hometown. Probably other technologies such as the internet are more useful to sustain the relationship with the region of origin, as Peng (2007) shows in her research.

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