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## “Exclusively for *Keitai*”

### Literary Creativity of Japanese Media Youths

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Mobile technology and wireless Internet were adopted early in Japan and created a unique opportunity for Japanese people to experience ubiquitous networking from the late 1990s. The role of Japan as a powerful test-bed for mobile technology has been acknowledged (Rheingold, 2002; Ito et al. 2005; Tomita, 2016), suggesting the presence of a unique cultural milieu of mobile media use in the region. The term *keitai* (the Japanese word for mobile phone, literally meaning ‘portable’ or ‘carry-with’) has been being favorably used by cultural scholars as a way to emphasize the unique context of the mobile technologies in Japanese everyday lives. While the interest in cultural contexts occasionally leads to the exaggeration of its Japaneseness, it may be important to note that the rise of *keitai* culture is to be understood as a part of the global mobile society (Castells et al. 2007) *keitai* culture should be explored as a way to disclose the socio-cultural dynamism of the everyday practices in different contexts such as generations, genders, locations, economic situation, etc., rather than focusing on its use tendency.

#### *Keitai shôsetsu* and young creators in Japan

Despite continuing anxieties and widespread skepticism surrounding excessive use of mobile media among youths (Matsuda, 2010), the activeness of the young generation in the formation of *keitai* culture has been prominent in Japan. For instance, Tomita et al. (1997) paid at-

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tention to the youths' entertaining and creative interpretation of pagers (a nascent mobile medium capable only of sending a call signal) in the mid-1990s as a social background to generate a desire for new types of peer communication through the mobile network. More recently, it seems obvious that young users' overwhelming preference for mobile social media such as Twitter, Facebook and LINE<sup>1</sup> has been creating a new trend for social networking and digital culture. It is undeniable that Japanese youths have played a crucial role as a cultural pathfinder of new media at every turning point, taking the lead in repositioning new technology into one's everyday life.

In this article, I put the spotlight on a phenomenon called *keitai shōsetsu*, a form of user-created literature written and read exclusively on the mobile platform, in order to demonstrate young females' role in initiating mobile literary creativity in Japan. Similar to other interactive literature, the *keitai shōsetsu* (as *shōsetsu* means “novel”, *keitai shōsetsu* literally means “mobile novel” or “portable novel”) is usually written by voluntary amateur writers, shared on a specialized website, and read by audiences as it is being created. It has been particularly popular among young females, explaining its feminine tastes in plots such as love stories, soft school fiction, and romantic science fiction. One of the key characteristics of *keitai shōsetsu* is that its writing and reading practices take place on mobile media at the individual's own convenience, to explain its unique naming. It got its start in 2000, when *Maho-No-Airando*, an online community service provider, launched a *keitai*-specialized blog platform featuring a “story writing” channel. It may be noteworthy that this was far before the global rise of the smartphone, while in other regions wireless Internet service did not exist or, if it did, was struggling to attract consumers.

In spite of the increasing popularity of this new channel, *keitai shōsetsu* was hardly noticed by the mass media until the commercial success of the work titled *Koizora* (Love Sky) in 2005. The story, originally created and uploaded by the amateur writer Mika, gained popularity on *Maho No Airando's* website, and was transformed into a printed book to phenomenal success. Its commercial breakthrough is partly related to its distributional structure, in that the interactive authorship of *keitai shōsetsu* often brings forth loyal readers who are willing to not only subscribe in cyberspace, but also purchase a paper

book due to a desire to own it as a physical medium. The content sold more than a million copies as a printed book, and was reproduced in other media forms such as manga, TV drama, and a movie, yielding impressive results here as well. Eventually, the social achievement of *Koizora* brought to the forefront the fact that millions of young female users were actively participating in media production and consumption in cyberspace. It was also remarkable that the creativity and marketing power of this phenomenon were entirely grounded in mobile media.

The success of this Internet-originated interactive literature was not the first case. For instance, a few years before the rise of *Koizora*, an Internet-oriented story titled *Densha Otoko* (Train Boy) — an interactive literature work originally uploaded to 2ch (ni-channeru), a well-known anonymous BBS<sup>2</sup> forum in Japan — enjoyed great success through multimedia marketing, appearing as a printed book, manga, a movie, TV drama, and a play. The story features an introverted *otaku* (technology geek) seeking a way to ask a gorgeous girl to go out with him, presenting the typical male tastes in cyberspace.

The image of *otaku* certainly stereotypes an introvert and unstylish male who reversely becomes active and aggressive in the anonymous cyberspace. In fact, there is a firmly rooted dichotomous thinking in Japan that, while males are loyal and active users of new technology, females are less enthusiastic and are thus slow to adopt new devices. As a creative force on the online platform, women had been regarded as lagging behind technological trends, unless they were related to the so-called feminine genres such as fashion and cosmetics. However, the phenomenal success of *keitai shōsetsu* worked as counter-evidence of this prejudice, to prove the power of females as a creative drive and savvy consumers of new technology. Hjorth (2009) accurately noted that the mobile platform has provided a niche for Japanese female users to exert their creativity to reflect their own tastes.

Meanwhile, *keitai shōsetsu* found itself the subject of social criticism and public anxiety. Because its story often deals with such sensational issues as teenage sex, group bullying in school, rape, teen pregnancy, and abortion, it cannot escape the denunciation of lacking reality in the Japanese teen's context. The writing style of *keitai shōsetsu* also became the target of severe criticism, as the stories tend to contain grammatically incorrect or misspelled words. While the young amateur writers of

*keitai shōsetsu* often use unskilled and juvenile expressions, the frequent grammatical errors are partly due to its colloquial writing styles, often centered on a series of conversations or short expressions for readers' emotional immersion and enjoyment. Because of the combination of unrealistic story composition and poor expression, professional writers and critics alike despised *keitai shōsetsu* as a sort of “false literature”, supported only by immature youngsters.

In the aftermath of the runaway success of *Koizora*, only a handful of the *keitai shōsetsu* sold well in paper book form, and the amount of social attention paid to *keitai shōsetsu* has declined amidst sluggish sales. When the website *Maho-No-Airando*, the largest *keitai shōsetsu* distributor, was sold to a giant publishing company in 2011, social discourses started mentioning *keitai shōsetsu* as a transient phenomenon

that had run its course. Although the phenomenon itself disappeared from public attention, a survey released in 2011<sup>3</sup> showed that the reading public of *keitai shōsetsu* is growing in line with the increase in smartphone use. Furthermore, dozens of commercial *keitai shōsetsu* websites are still operating with a profitable business model, transforming interactive literature into printed books for sale (Figure 1). In other words, *keitai shōsetsu* succeeded in making inroads into the privileged position of Japanese literary circles, to prove the emergence of new creativity on the mobile platform by young generations.



Image 1. Maho No Airando is actively running its *keitai shōsetsu* channel. Accessed December 2, 2016.

### Exclusively for *keitai*: From insiders' voices

As *keitai shōsetsu* involves a wide range of literary communication, such as reading, writing, or sharing comments on mobile phones, one key question is how to approach literary creativity on the most up-to-

date technological platform. This has hitherto been a relatively ignored issue, overwhelmed by discourses on the novelty of mobile technology as well as the strong stereotype of traditional literature. In this regard, in my ethnographic research on authors and loyal readers of *keitai shōsetsu* in urban areas of Japan since 2009 (Kim, 2012), I focused more on a subjective and voluntary aspect of their creativity rather than an objective and social interpretation of mobile media and literature itself.

Although the specific circumstances of experiences differ from person to person, in many cases the presence of *keitai* seemed an overwhelming and critical element of “doing *keitai shōsetsu*”. The majority of *keitai shōsetsu* consumers exclusively chose mobile media as their favorite platform for both writing and reading. In fact, most consumers opposed the argument that they were forced to read the literature on their mobile platforms because they had no access to other media, such as a PC. Many instead insisted that the mobile media was the best interface for maximizing their enjoyment, and that other media would not allow them to savor the content to its full extent:

I’ve read the same *keitai shōsetsu* on both the *keitai* and PC since I liked the story very much. I even read it in paperback form. But only reading on *keitai* moved me to tears. *Keitai shōsetsu* has its own expression, one that’s best delivered through *keitai*. [S, female, 21, college student]

This can be understood in relation to the material characteristics of the dominant *keitai* models in Japan at the time, which were mostly the flip-close types with vertically rectangular and smaller screens (compared to those of early smartphone models). As most *keitai shōsetsu* websites provided a best-viewed interface for these domestic models, the genre’s production required not only the plotting of a story, but also an integration and interspersing of expressions painstakingly tailored for, or highly restricted by, the mobile interface of *keitai* (Figure 2). An author of *keitai shōsetsu* explained that:

The story and characters are of course very important, but it’s also critical to imagine what it will look like on *keitai* screens when you write a story. For example, I’m paying the closest attention to the line spacing of the text. I enter some blank lines intentionally when I want readers to take a few minutes to scroll down before going to

**Image 2.** The reading and writing of *keitai shōsetsu* was most favorably performed with the dominant models in Japan at the time. Photographed in June, 2009.



the next sentence. That way, I can control how they dwell on the emotions of characters. [Y, female, 23, office worker]

Some authors tried to maintain a more strategic attitude, saying they even paid close attention to managing technological conditions so as to reach more readers and make them stick to their stories. As one respondent stated:

I pay particular attention to what time I should update new content. I usually post a new text during the day. I know some readers set a notice function so that they'll be immediately notified that new content has been posted. Once I put up a new text late at night, when everyone was in all likelihood sleeping, and not many people accessed this new content the next day. [T, female, 21, college student]

As a form of creative practice, *keitai shōsetsu* is not a simple presentation of fictional literature but rather an integrated expression exclusively designed for the material characteristics of mobile media. This raises the possibility that the phenomenon might be situated and better described within the framework of creative affordance to mobile media, rather than general discourses on interactive literature and digital content.

While the material conditions of the interface of mobile media seemed to be a crucial aspect for *keitai shōsetsu* enthusiasts, their choices were not only based on functional and practical reasons but were also

underpinned by the commitment to the specific environment of using mobile media. Many interviewees stated that their reading experiences tended to exclusively take place at a designated time and place. For example, a respondent described her emotional encounter with *keitai shōsetsu* as follows:

I started reading *keitai shōsetsu* because I was suffering from insomnia. I had trouble falling asleep so I wanted to make my eyes tired by reading something before sleeping. My first *keitai shōsetsu* was *Koizora*; it was a hot topic then. I actually stayed up all night so I could finish it. The story was so touching that I cried all night. From that point on I was totally hooked on *keitai shōsetsu*. I read them almost every night; that is, as long as I'm not so tired that I have to zonk out. It's ironic that it has now become another obstacle to sleep. [S, female, 20, college student]

This case is not at all extraordinary, as a significant number of respondents identified “in bed before sleeping” as the ideal situation for reading *keitai shōsetsu*. Playing with one's mobile media in bed before sleeping was a widespread practice among youngsters, being a place they experienced complete privacy and were the most likely to be able to relax (Figure 3).

Affective attachment and mobile intimacy seemed to serve as another pivot for creative activity, as many respondents mentioned their emotional moments and intimate sensitivity in writing and reading



Image 3. *Keitai shōsetsu* often delivers intimate and emotional messages, sometimes with erotic fantasy, suggesting readers' taste of reading alone before sleeping.

stories. A significant number of respondents related the experience of writing and reading *keitai shōsetsu* to that of exchanging *keitai* emails with close friends. They claimed that *keitai shōsetsu* was by no means a new or fresh experience, as they were already accustomed to *keitai* emails:

*Keitai shōsetsu* are more akin to personal messages than serious literature. I became accustomed to *keitai shōsetsu* so quickly, because it doesn't feel that new. [Y, female, 26, office worker]

From the standpoint of how insiders actually understand and translate this phenomenon, cultural patterns of *keitai shōsetsu* – namely, how to coordinate writing, reading, and commenting on the literature on mobile broadband – should be positioned as the “remediation” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) of email rather than literature. By exploring the insider's voice around *keitai shōsetsu*, we can begin to understand the technological context of young creators in Japan, as well as the emotional and intimate texture of creative labors with mobile media.

### Literary creativity and a historical link

The preference for literary communication in Japanese mobile media use was reported in a recent survey in Japan (Matsuda et al., 2014), showing email (88%) rather than voice calls to be the preferred feature of mobile media as a communication tool. According to the results, this tendency was even prominent among the younger demographic and female users, suggesting that this most up-to-date technology is deliberately devoted to old-fashioned communications; that is, writing and reading rather than richer visual expression. The prosperity of literary expression and diverse creativity might be one of the distinct characteristics of Japanese cyberspace, especially when the early adaptation of wireless Internet with low bandwidth encouraged users to develop mobile communication strategies whereby one consumed less network capacity but could convey rich contexts. Certainly, *keitai shōsetsu*, as an emerging type of literary creativity, can be understood as an inheritor of this tendency.

Furthermore, as a creative use of a new device (*keitai*) within a contemporary social context (urban environment), the practical prototype of *keitai shōsetsu* can be found the early stage of postal media in Japan

during the Meiji era (Kim, 2014). Today, postal media, such as a letter or a postcard, may be suitably understood as parts of social system rather than as communication technology. However, in the early era of the postal system, sending and receiving a postal medium across geographical spaces was a novel way to create feelings of telepresence (Milne, 2010). When postcards first emerged as a medium for this new attraction, ordinary people used them to write short fictional stories, called *hagaki-shōsetsu* (*hagaki* means “postcard”; thus, “postcard novel”).

It is not difficult to find the similarity between *keitai shōsetsu* and *hagaki-shōsetsu*, in the link of both the literary genre and the new medium of the day. It is interesting to note that, in other countries such as Mainland China and South Korea, there were attempts to build online mobile novel platforms, mainly prompted by the mega-hit of *Koizora* in Japan. However, neither of these countries achieved recognizable success. In this sense, *keitai shōsetsu* certainly provides a concrete example of the social appropriation and cultural customization of mobile technologies in Japan, revealing how new technology (mobile media) resonates with existing cultural prototypes (literature) to generate new creativity.

### Conclusion: Mobile media as a creative platform

This article has sought to delineate *keitai shōsetsu* as an emerging creativity by the Japanese younger generation, by looking into a cultural mechanism that allows to build and handle their creativity in everyday experiences with mobile media. While *keitai shōsetsu* shares many of the cultural displays of interactive literature in cyberspace, this phenomenon cannot be fully understood without the consideration of *keitai* as a medium, or the gendered socio-historical context of Japanese society. In terms of the refashioning of email rather than literature, *keitai shōsetsu* is rather a cultural practice for relocating mobile media into one’s everyday experiences, revealing its possibility as a new creative platform.

Many aspects of mobile media have been praised; however, the focus has been on its technological novelty and social role as a communication tool. With the convincing case of *keitai shōsetsu*, we can begin to understand how creative dynamism has been deployed around mobile media, and how new creativity is being evolved and modified by an

outsider group: young Japanese females. We need to understand this emerging issue surrounding new media in youngsters' creative activism in cyberspace, and to grasp diverse cultural moments in the midst of everyday practices. This new form of creativity revealed tensions between social innovation and harmful effect, both old and new, and in different social groups. The question of mobile media as a creative tool for both society and individuals could be a starting point in reflecting its path as a socio-cultural artefact.

### Notes

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line\\_\(software\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line_(software))
2. BBS is an acronym for Bulletin Board System, commonly used in Japan to describe an online content platform mainly for reading and writing.
3. <http://internetcom.jp/research/20110708/1.html>

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