

## Chapter 1

# Mobile Media and the Rise of 'Glocal Intimacies' in Asia

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### Abstract

*Although 'intimacy' has been often construed as the relationship between two individuals, we contend that these are also 'social' and are always imbricated in broader social dynamics. In Asia, the social dimension of intimacies, whether romantic, familial, or communal, is very much pronounced. Crucially, it is also increasingly enacted through mobile media. We argue that these ubiquitous mobile technologies have contributed to the transformation of intimate social relationships in the region. We underscore especially that they have become central to people's experiences of what we call 'glocal intimacies'. By this we mean that such technologies have both normalised and intensified how people's interpersonal relationships are entangled in the ever-shifting and constantly negotiated flows between global modernity and local everyday life. This is particularly evident when they seek to use mobile media to reconfigure their local ties and to enact global relationships. These experiences powerfully exemplify how their mediated intimacies are caught between the homogenising influence of the global and the persistent grounding of the local.*

### Keywords

Mobile media · Social intimacy · Glocal · East Asia · Southeast Asia

## 1.1 Introduction

The East/Southeast Asian (henceforth Asian) region has been the site of many recent innovations in mobile media. It has seen the rise of giant mobile technology developers like China's Huawei and South Korea's Samsung as well as smaller mobile phone brands like The Philippines' MyPhone and Malaysia's M.Mobile. The region has also seen the proliferation of its 'homegrown' mobile messenger apps like QQ, WeChat, KakaoTalk, and LINE. Coupled with Asia's increasing access to

global mobile technologies—from Apple to Android to Facebook to Instagram—it is no surprise that, the continued asymmetrical access and use notwithstanding, mobile media have become ubiquitous for many people in the region (see GSMA 2018; see also Chan et al. 2017; Park and Lee 2015).

That said, there has yet to be sustained programmatic research on what the ubiquity of mobile media might mean for the contemporary transformation of social intimacies in Asia. What role do such technologies play in the myriad ongoing shifts to the ways that people in the region build and experience diverse forms of what Lynn Jamieson (2011) calls a 'close connection between people' (p. 1)? How might mobile media matter, for instance, in the changes to how, in the different contexts of Asia, women imagine and practice intimate relationships of love, romance, and sex (for example, Blackburn 2001; Jackson et al. 2008)? or parents and children cope with the normalisation of transnational families (for example, Hoang and Yeoh 2015)? or cultural minorities seek and build communities of support and activism (for example, Luther and Ung Loh 2019)? This volume contributes to establishing a robust research agenda precisely about its title: *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia*. Collectively, its chapters attend to how mobile technologies matter in the region's different kinds of intimacies, particularly the romantic, the familial, and the communal.

## 1.2 On Mobile Mediated Asian Intimacies as Social

At this early juncture, we want to clarify our use of the term 'social intimacies' in exploring the relationship between mobile media and the different kinds of close connection between people in Asia. It might seem paradoxical that this volume puts the concepts of 'intimacy' and the 'social' together, as the former often evokes the idea of a relationship between two individuals. But in doing so, we are deliberately signalling that even the most private forms of intimacy are always imbricated in broader social dynamics. This volume connects with other extant works that also aim to re-emphasise the social nature of intimacy, such as Lauren Berlant's (1998) 'institutions of intimacy', Michael Herzfeld's 'cultural intimacy' (1996), and Ken Plummer's 'intimate citizenship' (2003). At the same time, it also connects with the existing scholarship on media and intimacy that attend to the social, like Sue Barker et al. (2018) 'mediated intimacies', Chris Rojek's (2015) 'presumed intimacy', and, closest to our concern, Larissa Hjorth and Sun Sun Lim's 'mobile intimacies' (2012).

Like the works above, we push back on approaches that valorise the 'individualisation thesis' to intimacy (Giddens 1992). We seek to nuance claims that in modern society, individuals are increasingly released from their social scripts and have become free to make up their own rules (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) and that human relations are increasingly characterised by a profound weakening of social ties (Bauman 2003). Asia is an especially productive region to think through such claims, what with its long, rich, and diverse histories as well as its digitally and technologically innovative future trajectories (Lim and

Soriano 2016). In many parts of the region, the social dimension of intimacies is actually very pronounced and, crucially, the enactment of many of these intimacies now often involves using mobile media. These intensely social mobile media intimacies are manifested in different forms of relationships in Asia. Take for instance how mobile spaces often become sites where people strongly articulate shared ideals about and police the boundaries around marriage (see Chap. 4), motherhood (see Chap. 8), and filial piety (see Chap. 10). Equally important, this social dimension of mediated intimacies is made evident in how different individuals use mobile technologies in their struggle to challenge these different ideals and practices of relationships. This can be seen in how young women might desire dating experiences that are more in line with Western ideas of modern romance (see Chap. 7) or how urban families attempt to incorporate modern conceptions of familyhood (see Chap. 3).

What we want to do in this volume, therefore, is to capture how interpersonal relationships are always-already linked to the ever-shifting and constantly negotiated flows of global modernity. We also want to explore how mobile media have become a crucial site where such social intimacies are enacted, reinforced, and transformed. In the next section, we flesh out our approach for accomplishing this.

### **1.3 On Mobile Mediated Asian Intimacies as 'Glocal'**

We contend that the most salient conceptual insight that runs across all the chapters in this volume is that there is a distinct kind of relationship between mobile media and social intimacies that seems to be emerging from the diverse contexts of Asia. It is that these technologies are simultaneously normalising and intensifying what we would like to call 'glocal intimacies'. This argument is comprised of two entwined points.

The first point is that there is such a phenomenon as 'glocal intimacies'. We use this term to refer specifically to those imaginaries and practices surrounding different social intimacies that have emerged from the negotiation between global modernity and local everyday life. This concept builds on the cultural sociologist Roland Robertson's (1994) notion of 'glocalisation'. Similar to Robertson, we do not use the notion of 'glocal' in its popular sense, that is, as a micro-marketing buzzword that pertains to crafting a product with a 'global outlook adapted to local conditions' (p. 36). We instead use it to challenge the idea that globalisation is just about cultural homogenisation and to emphasise that it always involves 'the simultaneity and inter-penetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local—or in more general vein—the universal and the particular' (Robertson 1994, p. 38).

Going beyond Robertson, however, we do not just want to say that there is an element of the global in the local and vice versa. To be sure, much of what is called local in the Asian region is also a byproduct of negotiations with the global forces

from its colonial past and from its neo/postcolonial present. But at the same time, there is a distinct socio-cultural power dynamic at work in the region. As the subsequent chapters show, the undeniably homogenising influence of global modernity notwithstanding, local everyday life strongly persists in Asian social intimacies. This is evident in how people in the region seek either to reconfigure their local ties (see Chaps. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 in Part I of this volume) or to enact global relationships (see Chaps. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 in Part II of this volume).

The second point is that mobile media are both normalising and intensifying glocal intimacies. Here we are referring to how such technologies have become central to people's experiences of being entangled in both the influence of global modernity and the persistence of local everyday life. It is important to point out, however, that there is tremendous variation in the quality of information and communication technology (ICT) access across the Asian region and within Asian countries: from 'deprived contexts' (Arora and Scheiber 2017) to places of 'good enough access' (Uy-Tioco 2019) to 'information societies' that continue to have internal digital divides (Wong et al. 2010). What this means is that even if most people in Asia experience mobile mediated 'glocal intimacies', they do not do so in the same way. The chapters in the volume, for instance, gravitated towards those people who are at the forefront of this phenomenon. This is because their mobile media use is closest to what Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2012) call 'polymedia', where ICTs function as an integrated structure that offers a communicative environment of affordances. These polymedia-enabled people include, amongst others, the gay males in China's own gay dating app *Blued* (Chap. 2), the 'smart *ajummas* (아줌마)' or middle-aged women in South Korea's messaging app *KakaoTalk* (Chap. 5), and the K-Pop 'passionate fandom' in Vietnamese Facebook (Chap. 12).

Mobile media have normalised glocal intimacies for the polymedia-enabled Asians in this volume because of the portability and, as such, the availability of these technologies (see Schrock 2015). These people literally carry the tensions between the globality and locality of their social intimacies 'in [their] pocket' (see Chap. 6). At the same time, mobile media have intensified glocal intimacies for these Asians because of how these technologies are all at once the most personal and individual but also the most social and global of ICTs (Hjorth and Lim 2012; Miller et al. 2016). So even in these people's most private one-to-one mobile mediated social intimacies, they are still caught up in the broader social frictions between globality and locality and, as such, are continually confronted by the 'translocal' (see Chap. 9).

By framing the chapters in this volume as different cases of how mobile media both normalise and intensify glocal intimacies, we hope that the readers become more attentive to the complex manifestations of such kinds of mediated social intimacies in the diverse contexts of the Asian region. As a heuristic frame, we have divided these manifestations of mediated social intimacies into two themes: one about the reconfiguration of the local and the other about the enactment of the global.

## 1.4 Reconfiguring the Local

The first five chapters in this volume centre on the notion of local social intimacies being reconfigured by mobile media. Amongst these, the first two focus on the possibilities and challenges that individuals are confronted with when there is a strong tension between the transformations in social intimacies offered by mobile media and persistence of ideal social intimacies grounded in local Asian contexts. In his chapter, "Now You Can See Who's Around You": Negotiating and Regulating Gay Intimacies on Mobile Media in the People's Republic of China' (Chap. 2), James Cummings explores relationships between mobile media and social and sexual intimacies for gay men in China by focusing on the location-aware gay dating app Blued. His extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Hainan, an island province in southern China, reveals that, on one hand, mobile media apps offer Chinese gay men access to each other. The welcomed visibility provided by the app allows them to find a sense of community, belonging, and authenticity. But at the same time, this visibility becomes entangled in the still conservative dynamics of broader Chinese society in ways that can endanger them. The Chinese gay men raise fears of being 'outed' and being called out for 'in-/appropriate' forms of social and sexual intimacy. Cummings consequently argues that while mobile media have allowed for shifts that enable Chinese gay men experiences that are in line with other gay men in global Western contexts, their experiences are also still shaped by the local socio-cultural and political specificities of everyday life in China.

In a similar vein, Julian Hopkins attends to the dynamics of the local in his chapter, 'Networked Individualism and Networked Families in Malaysia' (Chap. 3). Here, he examines the local uses of social media and messaging apps in Malaysian families, contrasting these with social media's transnational global forms, genres, and practices. To do this, Hopkins draws on the theory of 'networked individualism' and argues that modernising changes brought about by economic development including the adoption of ICTs results in the displacement of family, local community, and the workplace as central forces in the lives of people. At the same time, he argues that while 'networked individualism' suggests a shift away from family cohesiveness and solidarity, digital media can also be used to sustain and maintain family networks. Despite the trend towards individualism brought about by global modernity, Hopkins' research on multi-generational Malaysian family households finds that Malaysian families use social media to maintain and even strengthen ties, once again emphasising the persistence of local practices.

The next three chapters present cases that are illustrative of what happens when the persistence of particular kinds of ideal social intimacies rein in the reconfigurations afforded by mobile media or, vice versa, when mobile media affordances strongly reconfigure local social intimacies. Wenjing Liu's chapter, 'Torture and Love: Wives of Chinese Gay Men and Their Cyber Communities' (Chap. 4) is a clear example of how the local, while shifting and changing due to the proliferation of mobile media technologies and global influences, continues to

limit the possibilities for social change. In her research on the cybercommunities of the *tongqis* (同妻), or wives of Chinese gay men, Liu finds that digital media provide a space for support and community building for *tongqis*, as well as platforms to educate the public (both locally and globally) and advocate for social and political change. However, her research also shows that until laws and societal attitudes about intimate relationships and censorship in China change, the tortured lives of the *tongqis* will continue to exist. Nonetheless, Liu argues that the solidarity and empowerment that *tongqis* experience through cybercommunities should not be ignored or minimized. She contends that such solidarities are essential in navigating the hardships and loneliness of everyday married life to gay men and provide hope for eventual structural and cultural change.

Meanwhile, the reconfiguring of the local as influenced by the forces of global modernity is evident in Jung Youn Moon's 'The Digital Wash Place: Mobile Messaging Apps as New Communal Spaces for Korean "Smart *Ajummas*"' (Chap. 5). Through surveys and online focus groups with the so-called *ajummas*—middle-aged, married women belonging to the most misunderstood and most stigmatized demographic group in contemporary South Korea—Moon examines their use of smartphones. She pays particular attention to how their group chats in the mobile app KakaoTalk have provided a space for them to build community. Moon posits that for the *ajummas*, KakaoTalk group chat rooms have become a 'digital *ppal-let-ter* (빨래터)' or a digital washplace, that is, a modern-day version of the traditional brooks and streams where women congregated to do their laundry and share stories of their everyday lives. In conceptualising them as 'smart *ajummas*', Moon's study challenges dominant research on the youth as new media 'digital natives' and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how gender and age shape new media practices, highlighting the local specificities of social intimacies in Korean society.

This strong reconfiguration of the local is also the focus of the closing chapter of part one, Hattie Liew's 'Fandom in my Pocket: Mobile Social Intimacies in WhatsApp Fan Groups' (Chap. 6). Here, she investigates how Singaporean fan groups of popular music singers on the closed-group mobile messaging app shape fan experiences. Liew sheds light on WhatsApp fan chat groups, those private mobile fan spaces where fans are able to participate in fandom in plain sight while, crucially, avoiding ridicule and mockery from the judgmental others around them. She contends that these mobile mediated fan spaces serve as public private spaces that facilitate the mobility of social intimacy between fans in ways that circumvent their other local relationships. 'Doing fandom' on WhatsApp, then, becomes shaped primarily by the specific characteristics of a mobile media app that is used by many fans the world over as well as the meanings that fans make from using the platform.

### 1.5 Enacting the Global

The second part of this volume is comprised of six chapters that illustrate the ways in which mobile media contribute to the enactment of global social intimacies. Here we see that while mobile media enable global and transnational connections, the specificities of local environments continue shaping these mediated intimate relationships. Part two opens with Jason Cabañes and Christanne Collantes' chapter, 'Dating Apps as Digital Flyovers: Mobile Media and Global Intimacies in a Postcolonial City (Chap. 7)'. They examine how middle-class millennial Filipino women use mobile dating apps as 'digital flyovers' to find foreign romantic partners, bypassing what they think to be 'uncosmopolitan' Filipino men. Drawing from 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Philippines capital of Manila, Cabañes and Collantes show that these women are able to access digital spaces that pave the way for the cosmopolitan global intimacies that they desire. They also emphasise, however, that these digital flyovers do not remove them from the distinct social dynamics of the capital city's middle class. Despite the desire of these women to be global cosmopolitans then, they remain embedded in predominantly conservative Roman Catholic and class-divided postcolonial city.

In the succeeding two chapters, there is a special emphasis on how the social intimacies that mobile media allow become subject to a transnational form of surveillance brought about by the ubiquity of the same technologies. Tingyu Kang's chapter, 'Visualizing Birth Tourism on Social Media: Taiwanese Expectant Mothers in the United States (Chap. 8)' examines how Taiwanese expectant mothers used mobile media to negotiate the surveilling gaze of family and friends in the homeland while they awaited the birth of their child in Los Angeles. Kang uncovers how their choice of photos and social media apps were linked to how they wished to be perceived and how they used various photo-sharing strategies to avoid the digital gaze on their reproductive bodies. On more public sites such as Facebook, these expectant mothers digitally visualized their spatial experiences through photos of white consumerist locales outside their Chinese-speaking neighborhoods to signify an upper-middle-class status. However, private mobile apps such as LINE were used to keep in touch with spouses, parents, and the extended family who wanted to monitor their reproductive bodies. Here expectant mothers shared photos of ultrasounds, their 'bump', and the newborn. Kang points out that not all expectant mothers were happy to share photos as 'spatial mobility and consumerist pleasure are considered excessive in the medical-moral imagery of ideal expectant motherhood'.

Parallel to this is Hong Chen's research on left-behind children of migrant parents in China. His chapter, 'Left-Behind Children as Agents: Mobile Media, Transnational Communication and the Mediated Family Gaze' (Chap. 9) examines how left-behind children from Fuqing, a major illicit migrant-sending area in China perceive the use of mobile media during transnational communications with their migrant parents. Here, Chen develops the concept of the 'mediated family gaze' to describe the familial power dynamics and emotional circulation in a technologically mediated context. With data from in-depth interviews with 38 left-behind children in Fuqing, China, Chen argues that they are not mere passive

objects of migration dominant in most studies. Rather, left-behind children use mobile media to enact agency in shaping the intergenerational transnational relationship with parents working and living in the UK. The affordances of mobile media enable the left-behind children to strategize their responses to far-away parents and manage their surveilling gaze.

The following two chapters carry on with a concern with transnational families. Their focus, however, moves away from surveillance and is more about the broader implications of mobile media on the relationships of people who try to 'do family' in a global context. Cecilia Uy-Tioco and Earvin Cabalquinto's chapter, 'Transnational Mobile Carework: Filipino Migrants, Family Intimacy, and Mobile Media' (Chap. 10) looks at how mobile media facilitate intimacies between elite migrant Filipino adult children in the United States and their aging left-behind parents in the Philippines. Using the concept of 'mobile carework' to articulate the intimate, personalised, mobile, and negotiated care practices of transnational family members shaped by the merging of socio-cultural and technological forces, they argue familial intimacy can be forged and embodied through transnational caregiving practices. Because elite Filipino migrants live in polymedia-rich environments, mediated mobile carework is carried out through in the everyday and routinized expressions of care, the microcoordination of care, the management of tensions and conflicts, and the performance of care. Here, we see that familial intimacies in the form of filial piety is enacted despite physical distances.

Young A Jung's chapter 'Mobile Media and *Kirogi* Mothers: Place-making and the Reimagination of Transnational Korean Family Intimacies' (Chap. 11) considers the flipside of transnational families. While scholarship on migration tend to focus on the ways mobile media enable transnational families to flourish, Jung attends to the role ICTs play in the emplacement of migrant families. She examines Korean *kirogi* (기러기) families, that is, transnational migrant families who split their household for a temporary period so that the children can be educated in an English-speaking country. In particular, she looks at Korean mothers and children living in the Northern Virginia communities of Centreville and McLean with fathers who remain working in South Korea. Although she initially hypothesized that there would be differences between the working-class Centreville and middle-class McLean families, her extensive fieldwork revealed that both groups utilise mobile media technologies to create a sense of belonging and place-making in the United States. In particular, both groups of *kirogi* mothers use mobile media to navigate the challenges that come with migrant life such as the fulfillment of familial goals, the changing conceptions of family, and the need to cultivate a sense of belonging and community in the place of settlement.

To close out the second part and the volume, Ha Hoang looks at the enactment of global social intimacies in a community context. Her chapter, 'K-Pop Male Androgyny, Mediated Intimacy, and Vietnamese Fandom' (Chap. 12), focuses on a case of transnational fandom: the Facebook-based 'passionate' Vietnamese fan



communities of K-Pop star G-Dragon and their responses to his androgynous look. Hoang argues that enabled by mobile media, such as mobile phones, fans are now able to seamlessly participate in Facebook fan pages. Through their constant sharing and circulating of idol-related texts and their creation of fan-made media products through mobile phones, their fan-feelings become increasingly intensified and contagious, pulling them emotionally ever closer to the wider K-Pop fandom in the digital world.

## 1.6 Challenges and Future Directions

As part of the *Mobile Communication in Asia: Local Insights, Global Implications* series, this volume brings to the forefront new and innovative research by emerging scholars in the field who seek to understand how the popularity of mobile media might shape and transform social intimacies across the region. Although this volume presents a diverse set of perspectives on what we have earlier posited as mobile media and the rise of glocal intimacies in Asia, it is by no means comprehensive. There is still much work that needs to be done, particularly as mobile media become more and more imbricated in the region's rich and varied forms of everyday social intimate relationships. We would like to end this introductory chapter with four points for reflection that emerged towards the end of the process of putting together this volume.

First is that while we opened up our search for contributors to all countries in East/Southeast Asia, it seemed that there was a lack of scholarship, particularly English-language scholarship, in several countries. This was especially the case in Southeast Asia. Research on mobile media and social relationships appears to have concentrated on technologically advanced countries such as South Korea, China, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan or countries with a history of innovative uses of mobile media technologies such as the Philippines. We of course wanted to receive contributions from countries that are not often written about in global scholarship, such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste. But we were also realistic about this because of how these countries have low mobile connectivity. What was more surprising though was that there were very few submissions, if any, on Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Brunei, where mobile penetration rates are over 100% (We Are Social 2019). We are cognisant, however, that this might partly have to do with the limits of our own scholarly networks as the volume editors. This highlights the pressing need to sustain and further strengthen existing transnational linkages amongst mobile media researchers working across the East and especially Southeast Asian regions. One excellent example of this is the Digital Transactions in Asia (DTA) network led by scholars from Australia, Malaysia, and The Philippines (<https://digitaltransactionsinasia.home.blog/>). At the time of this volume's publication, DTA would have had its third annual conference of scholars from across the Asia-Pacific.

A second reflection point is about how the chapters in this volume converged on a set of qualitative methods meant to explore social intimacies in the context of the everyday, namely in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic research, including digital ethnography. We contend that this methodological convergence is but apt for a book that showcases the richness in which mobile media have become part of the many ongoing shifts in the social intimacies in Asia. Such qualitative approaches to the everyday are helpful not only in situating people's mediated relationships within the complex social dynamics that distinguish various social contexts (Miller et al. 2016), but also in revealing what in specific circumstances people take to be common sense or, to put it more clearly, their sense of the common (Silverstone 2007). There are, of course, other methodological approaches that are equally worth pursuing. For example, going against the grain of contemporary interest in big data analytics, one can do small data analytics (see Mayer 2018). This means focusing on digital data sets that subvert the phenomenological logics of big data, such as the intimate archives of families, fans, and marginalised communities mentioned in the contributions in this volume. Doing so will allow for an exploration of how socially intimate relationships can generate data with use values, organisational controls, and ethics of consent that serve as an alternative to those associated with big data. One can also take a critical approach to visualisation techniques, both as regards making sense of and presenting the emerging data on mobile media and social intimacies in Asia (see Kennedy and Hill 2016). Making the data about these changing intimacies potentially more understandable to the broader public opens up the possibility of reshaping how, among other things, counsellors attend to young people and families, policymakers push for legislation protecting women and the LGBT community, and NGOs support the organisation of marginalised groups.

Thirdly, we limited our scope to the geographical areas of East and Southeast Asia. As Asia is incredibly diverse in its character and its engagements with mobile media (Lim and Soriano 2016), we thought that this delimitation would make it easier to draw thematic threads across the chapters. Together with East Asia and Southeast Asia, however, South Asia is also one of the three regions in the world with the highest mobile connectivity (We Are Social 2019). Bringing into the discussion South Asia as well as the geographically proximate Pacific Islands would really demonstrate how varied the relationship between mobile media and social intimacies can be in the broader Asian and even Asia-Pacific region. It would also shed light on the many interesting and innovative uses of mobile media in forging intimate relationships happening in the Global South. This should contribute to challenging the idea that the West is that norm and, consequently to the project of decentring media and communications scholarship from the West (Curran and Park 2000).

Finally, the populations studied in the chapters in this book have naturally gravitated toward polymedia-enabled users. Yet we know that even the most basic of mobile phones and other ICTs have transformed everyday life among people as evidenced by research on the use of Facebook for finding online friendship and

romance in lower class, lower caste India (Arora and Scheiber 2017) or coin-operated computers in the slum areas of the Philippines (Soriano et al. 2018) or working class ICTs such as Little Smart in China (Qiu 2009). Although the smartphone is rapidly being adopted across the Asian region, many places, especially in rural areas in developing or underdeveloped countries, continue to be on the wrong side of the digital divide. Despite this, mobile media has already transformed how everyday life and social intimacies are carried out despite 'good enough access' (Uy-Tioco 2019). Research on these 'low tech' connectivities and how they have transformed social intimacies would allow for comparative studies on the differences and similarities between the information 'haves' and 'have-less' (Qiu 2009).

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