

The Keitai Shosetsu and the Future of the Book

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Abstract *This paper aims to investigate the relationship between author and reader in the digital era, using Japanese mobile novels as a concrete example of this change.*

With the ongoing fervent debate over books' digitization, an analysis of the phenomenon of the mobile novels (Keitai Shosetsu) in Japan may be helpful in making significant statements concerning the future of the book, and of literature in general, in the era of new media and investigating important changes in the relationship between the author and the reader.

Keywords: Japanese mobile, mobile novel, digital storytelling, literary fact, intimate stranger

Interdisciplinary Fields: media studies, sociology of literature

Introduction

The ongoing debate concerning the book's digitization is very intense: digitization may lead to a revolution in people's habits and ways of thinking, as has happened with the invention of movable type printing and the advent of the printed book. A closer investigation of such a particular phenomenon as the mobile novels (Keitai Shosetsu) in Japan may be helpful in making significant statements concerning the future of literature in the era of the new media and investigate important changes in the relationship between the author and the reader.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between author and reader in the digital era, using Japanese mobile novels as a concrete example of this change. From time to time, in producing and consuming literature, authors and readers have played different roles. In the digital era, these two figures seem to merge into each other and give birth to a hybrid figure. At the same time, Japanese mobile phone features and Internet bulletin board system (BBS) anonymity allow authors and readers to interact and develop an even more intimate relationship.

This paper is articulated into three parts: First, I will underline Japanese mobile main features, which fostered the birth and growth of mobile novels in Japan.

Second, I will briefly explain what a mobile novel is and will make some considerations about the scenarios of production, consumption, and distribution of

this kind of storytelling, which is both culturally and temporally specific.

Third, I will suggest a model to understand the relationship between authors and readers in the Japanese mobile novel, basing my observations on Tomita's Intimate Stranger Theory in computer-mediated communication.

Features of Japanese Mobile Technology

In Japan, mobile novels are read and spread through the mobile phone. In order to understand the dimension of this phenomenon, it is important to emphasize Japanese mobile features as well as the strong impact that society and consumers' needs have on technology. [1]

Based on the premise that Japan mobile phones are essentially tools strictly connected with the keyboard communication services, we can outline three main features: personalization, multifunctionality, and portability. [2]

Firstly, the Japanese mobile phone has been developed mainly as a personal medium, a fact that Matsuda calls "personalization." [3] New Japanese generations express themselves and communicate daily through the mobile phone which has become an (almost physical) extension of their body, a tool to find their position in space and time, and that orientates them in building and consolidating relationships. Furthermore, its mobility and the possibility to connect quickly to the Internet guarantee efficient and effective communication among young Japanese. [4, 5, 6]

Secondly, the feature of multifunctionality that characterizes Japanese mobile phones has yielded two important results: The first is the development of an easy way to access the Internet. [7] Japan has seen a rapid spread of sites created exclusively for mobile phones. This phenomenon is linked to the campaign by Japanese telephone companies allowing their customers to surf the Internet using mobile phones at competitive prices compared to connecting through a computer. In 1999, the introduction of the i-Mode system allowed the first mobile Internet connection in Japan. Connection fees were significantly reduced with the normalization of prices in 2003, when it became possible to connect to the Internet at a fixed price. This created an accessible virtual environment in which to seek refuge, and write at any time and in any place.

The second result is the spread of a culture of email¹ that has become the predominant way of communication among young people. Proceeding from the mobile pager technology of the early 1990s, email technology consolidated this type of mediated communication and its standardization of how and when to use it. [8]

Thirdly, portability is a key factor in Japan, where the use of mobiles in public places is limited by strong social restrictions: talking on the phone in front of other

¹ In Japan, since 1999, thanks to the introduction of i-Mode, it has been possible to check emails directly from mobile devices far before from what happened in Europe, where mobile communication was mainly based on the exchange of short message texts (SMS).

people is impolite and thus avoided in order not to disturb them. [9] During the long train commuting time to and from work or school, mobile phone use is, therefore, limited to Internet services and related to the consolidation of a strong reading and writing habit via mobile phone. [10]

Keeping in mind that mobile novels are the products of technological and social issues merging together, all the three characteristics of the Japanese mobile mentioned above have contributed significantly to the emergence of the mobile novel culture.

The *Keitai Shosetsu*

The Japanese word to indicate a mobile novel is *Keitai Shosetsu*, meaning literally “portable” (keitai) “novel” (shosetsu).

The mobile novel phenomenon originated in Japan over ten years ago, first started by a young writer by the pen name of Yoshi who launched the first ever mobile phone novel in 2000. *Deep Love* was then published, made into a movie and a television drama, and ultimately transformed into a whole franchise. In the beginning, there was no website on which his cell phone novel could be read; instead, Yoshi sent out his piecemeal chapters to readers via email and MMS. Yoshi later created the first mobile novel website through a small investment, providing unprecedented access to his content on mobile phones all across Japan. Using various campaigns such as promotion leaflets handed out on the streets, Yoshi targeted high school students and created a huge reader base.

Since its beginnings, the Keitai Shosetsu was a new literary form mostly addressed to Japanese high school girls. Even to this day it keeps this characteristic. Stories are published in the form of episodes, which are uploaded on special websites that readers can access for free through their mobile phones. Anyone registered on the site has the opportunity, not only to read the published stories, but also to leave comments and circulate the stories among her friends by means of her mobile phone. The reader/user may become an author herself.

Just as the distance (and the distinction) between author and reader is blurred, the author’s and the reader’s roles in the Japanese mobile novel now merge together, marking a neat difference with the encrypted relation that characterized the printed book era. Mobile novels become an example of collaborative, choral work narration, wherein the author takes suggestions from the readers’ posted opinions to further develop her story.

Surprisingly, mobile phone novels have made the recovery of book publishing, which has been on the decline in recent years, possible: the most successful mobile stories are, in fact, published in the form of the printed book. In 2007, in many bookstores’ Top Ten Charts, five of them were originally mobile novels. [11]

However, a closer look at the printed version of mobile phone novels features

will reveal that just very little of the classic printed book is left.

Characters are printed horizontally and not vertically as in traditional Japanese novels.

Flipping through the pages, we find a new type of layout embodying the screen frame of the phone on which originally the stories were written. The characters printed on the page are few and sometimes unusual (borrowed from text message typography); empty spaces on the page are dominant and resemble the blank ones in *shojo mangas*,² used to convey hidden emotions.

The time frame for the creation and consumption of a mobile novel is very different from traditional novels as well. Mobile novels are generally written by high school girls during their long trip from home to school and vice versa. Stories can instantly be uploaded on the Internet and shared simultaneously with other users of the site.

Moreover, thanks to mobile novels, we have a concrete example of what we mean when we refer to a “subculture” in Japan and of how young people create social and digital links with a new medium, using it to express themselves and the group they belong to.

The mobile novels phenomenon allows, therefore, the highlighting of some important and altogether possible changes that literature will undergo with the advent of new media and which are already visible in the fruition, the production, and the distribution of a digital book.

A new type of fruition is born since the access to the literary product happens through a medium connected to the Internet. The implications of this shift from the physical book to its digital counterpart are remarkable in terms of the interactivity between the user and the product, the user and the author, and the product and the medium it is published in. Digital literature itself is now “published” in a highly interactive and intertextual context, which necessarily questions authors’ authority over their own work.

As for the production of a mobile novel, it is important to remark that the writer is not necessarily a “professional” author. Anyone who owns a mobile phone can promote himself/herself and his/her work, making use of the free self-publishing services provided by social media and thereby avoiding the exorbitant costs (and delays and production considerations) imposed by the traditional publishing system.

Important changes are visible in the distribution since the success of a novel depends on social media users and the number of views. Once the chain of publishing house distribution is broken, the users themselves will advertise their work through the network of their contacts and social media.

2 Manga marketed to a female audience roughly between the ages of 10 and 18.

The Author and the Reader in the Japanese Mobile Novel

The sociology of literature is concerned with examining the relationship between author and reader in different eras. In the field of literary criticism, the main source of interest was the text. In sociology of literature, the focus of interest shifts to all actors involved in the production and fruition of the work. The French scholar Escarpit [12] renamed the new field of investigation “literary fact.” “Literary fact” means, not only the text but also the author, the reader, and the relationships that bind these actors together. In this paper, I refer to the Japanese mobile novel as a literary fact: in fact, for the understanding of this phenomenon, the interactivity of online bulletin boards and the “new” relationship that exists between author and the reader thus supported by this interactivity should be considered as essential elements of my analysis.

Let us start by examining how the relationship between writer and reader has changed over time.

As a first distinction between the epochs that have characterized the literature up to the present day, we have the following terms: orality, literacy, and digital age.

In his research, Ong [13] defines “orality” as an era without written words. Since the actual, physical book with its linear and rational order did not exist yet, storytelling was mediated by the storyteller’s voice, articulated in rhythmical and redundant patterns. In trying to reconstruct the era of orality, Ong stresses that, since the “text” produced in a storytelling session was a single oral act, it disappeared once it was uttered.

At that time, the audience necessarily had to share the same space of the producers of the text. With the advent of writing, however, this space disappeared. Of course, the transition between orality and writing occurred gradually: for instance, there was a first transition wherein producers of the written text recited it in front of an audience of listeners (future readers).

In old times, the author belonged to the upper class and his work was devoted to the elevation of those in power; later, in the Middle Ages, although the author did not necessarily belong to the ruling class anymore, he could pursue his work thanks to his patrons. However, with the advent of the printing press and the book, and the emergence of a widespread distribution of the culture, the figure of the author became dominant. By writing, the physical space shared by the author and the reader at the moment of fruition of the text disappeared; at the same time, the author took a progressive distancing from his work. In fact, this came into play for the interests of publishers who were concerned with the distribution of the work (the printed book) and the building of a business around it (bookstores, libraries, etc.). [14]

Currently, with the advent of the digitization of books, the publishing sector is experiencing considerable downsizing. However it is too early to predict how the

“literary fact” of the future will be configured, since the printed book and its digital counterpart coexist.

The text in the shape of the book, with the passage of time, yellows, ages, and creases; it is declinable in an endless number of copies, but it is accessible to the reader only by the existence of a system that provides books to stores and libraries. On the other hand, the virtual text of the ebook is accessible and affordable as long as the reader possesses a device to access it. Agino [15] argues that the digital text allows several operations on it such as search, copy, and quote. Fiorino [16] adds that the reader can also operate on the text and edit it. With the digital text, the common space between author and reader comes in the form of a virtual environment wherein the author composes the text and the reader consumes it, intervenes in its creation, and shares it with other readers, while the presence of the intermediary (such as the publishing system) becomes weaker.

What are the dynamics implicated in this virtual proximity between writer and reader?

Tomita proposes a new model to explain the relationships that are created through mediated communication, expressed under the Intimate Stranger Theory: “intimate” because such relationships as illustrated by Giddens’s [17] definition of “genuine relationships” indicate relationships that are born for the sole purpose of forging a bond with the other person and enjoying the satisfaction of being connected to him; “stranger” because, as we have made clear before, the contextual information in mediated communication are not available. With the advent of social networks, this trend is gradually changing, but for the type of analysis presented in this paper, this is still relevant because in text-based communities, the anonymity of the user is still an issue.

Tomita [18] has done research on a variety of media to test the validity of his hypothesis. In particular, his research on two Japanese telephone services like 2shot and Party Line is relevant. Both these services involve the use of the telephone to create an anonymous environment wherein to chat with other users in a completely random conversation that is unlikely to be repeated, a kind of digital Russian roulette, if you will. However, with pager technology³ and the consolidation of the culture of email, the relationship with the Intimate Stranger is not limited to a single episode but now exists within a dimension of continuous interaction.

In addition to these observations, Tomita asserts that the occurrence of this type of relationship through media takes place progressively in a transformation: from a kind of instrumental communication to a consuming one. The first is a type of

³ Precursor of the cellphone. Okada [19] points out that originally the Pocket Bell was introduced as a pager, showing on its display the telephone number of those people who wanted to communicate with the Pocket Bell’s owner. The latter had to call the phone number back from a public telephone if outside the house or office. Later on, Pocket Bell users started using this tool to exchange messages, codifying the numbers on the displays, which no longer simple numbers but turned out to be encrypted messages.

communication aimed at the transmission of the message; in the second type the communicative act—the attempt to establish a contact—is considered as a priority.

The frame in which mobile novels are created possesses both the characteristics of mobile phone communication and online community interactivity. In the next section, I will illustrate the architecture of a mobile novel site wherein author and reader are not just producing and consuming texts, but are interacting with each other, all the while maintaining both anonymity and developing intimate relationships.

Case Study: Maho No Irando

There are many sites on which mobile novels are uploaded every day. I specifically chose the pioneering website Maho no irando (fig. 1): in fact, it is the first site in Japan that made it possible for users to upload their own mobile novels. Moreover, during the massive market expansion of mobile novels in 2007, many sites took inspiration from its architecture. Finally, the site hosted the stories of C, the female writer whom I interviewed in 2012.



Figure 1: Maho no irando's home page

Maho no irando hosts a whopping 2, 300, 000 titles; the BOOK function, allowing the upload of mobile novels, has been active since 2000.

Users register themselves with nicknames, and their relationships are mostly anonymous. The continuity and intimacy of this relationship are granted by the fact that the novel is regularly uploaded and that contacts between readers and authors take place daily.

The site has, in fact, a number of functions allowing interactivity between the author and the reader. Both have access to the same space; the text produced in this space is digital and, therefore, can be modified by the reader. In the email exchange

process, the so-called “incessant exchange” policy is in force. This means that a received message requires an immediate reply, since the transmission of the digital text is instantaneous.

This particular feature of email exchange on mobile phones is also reflected in the exchange of messages between author and reader, making their relation crammed and frequent.

The site includes the page of the author, the mobile novel page where the novel is progressively uploaded, and a search engine through which all the mobile novels stored in the database can be searched.

On the author page, the author can activate a series of tools giving them original names. Among the tools available, the most used are:

The diary – through the diary the author describes her daily life and notifies the upload of her own novel.

Tomodachi – meaning “friend”; through this tool the reader can make friends with the author. The author may then be able to check the number of accesses of her “friend” to the site: on the basis of accesses and comments, he may be able to establish deeper communication and relationships with his readers.

BOOK – through this tool the list of the books written by the author can be displayed.

Questionnaire – through this tool, visitors of the home page can express their opinions on the story development according to the question about the story provided by the author.

BBS – it can be used to organize events for readers. In each string, up to 100 interventions can be inserted. The author moves from one string to the other in order to create the effect of synchronic communication.

Mail box – this is used to exchange private messages with the author.

Counters – they are used to keep track of the guests visiting the webpage and of the progressive uploading of the page itself.

From the mobile novel page on which a specific novel is uploaded, the reader can connect directly to the author’s page or use the tools available on it to interact with her. He can write a comment about the novel he’s reading and share it, appropriately labeling spoilers if he has written information that could compromise the pleasure of reading readers who are just at the beginning of the story.

The reader may express his appreciation for the novel by clicking the button “like.” This appreciation will directly influence the ranking of the stories on the site.

Moreover, the reader can choose to catalogue the story in a subgenre among a range of choices; he can use predefined keywords shared with other readers to describe a story, thus inserting it in a further classification of genre. Using the Share

buttons for Facebook and Twitter, he can link the story and share it. Finally, he can also keep track of his reading progress through the Bookmark function.

On Maho no irando, authors and readers can share a virtual space on a daily basis using the tools available. The reader can intervene and influence both the development of the story and the reading of other people thanks to the tools at his disposal.

Case Study: C

In order to show concretely what kind of relationship may arise between reader and writer thanks to the tools available on the site, in the last part of the paper I will present the case study of C, a female writer of mobile novels, a pioneer of the genre, particularly active in her production, in order to see in a concrete case study the elements described above.

C started writing as a way to overcome a hard personal experience and her story touched millions of readers in Japan, making of her novel the stepstone for a serious development of KS.

The interview with C was held under the strict control of her manager, fact which shows the level of fame that these authors could reach at a point.

I went and visited her in Osaka, where she is working as a professional KS writer.

The interview lasted 3 hours, but I had the possibility to ask her a wide range of questions, inspite of the surveillance of her manager.

Her answers, together with an analysis of the main issues in her novels, were very helpful in getting an insight on the ways to KS as well as to show some of the dynamics outlined in the previous paragraphs of this paper.

C entered into the virtual world of the mobile phone during secondary school. Before having a mobile phone, she had even two pagers. Initially she used a mobile phone to exchange email with friends; then, she had to leave school after an incident that killed her boyfriend and caused her to lose all her friends. This moment coincided with the advent of the i-Mode feature allowed people to surf on Internet sites using the mobile phone.

As she began to use Maho no irando in 1999, C built her own homepage; then she used the BOOK function and started to write about her sad love story in the form of a mobile novel. At that time, the visitors of the homepage were about fifty people. Remembering the past caused her such painful sorrow that she was unable to continue and she decided to give up writing. For a period of time she even abandoned the home page. She got back to Maho no irando in 2003 and realized that her friends and readers had gone mad because her story had not been concluded and had been only partly uploaded. Encouraged by readers' comments, C took up her writing again. Once she had finished a story, she started writing others, thus

becoming one of the most prolific writers of the site, followed by up to 9,000 readers.

C had never thought of becoming a writer. She wrote and still writes in her spare time between one task and another, during train journeys back home, after dinner or time in the bathtub. C writes using her phone and sometimes her computer, even if she prefers the former. With the phone she doesn't suffer from that performance anxiety that she feels in front of a blank Word page. To communicate with readers, C uses her phone, because she is more familiar with this tool in the wake of pagers and email.

Readers have been of great importance for C. They encouraged her to continue the story that she was unable to finish. And they still help her in the creation process. As she says: "I write, readers read, they leave their comments, and there I find the motivation to keep on writing." Moreover, readers advertise her stories both in and outside the site, with their sharing, opinions, and comments. C talks about her readers in ambivalent terms. On one hand, they represent her family: their presence supports her work as a writer, showing her their solidarity. On the other hand, they are also a source of addiction and their eventual disappearance may cause her depression and insecurity.

As we can see from C's case study, we are witnessing on Maho no irando's BBS the birth of a new relationship between reader and author who, while maintaining the anonymity on the Internet, push towards an intimate relationship because of the continuous exchange of communication which the interactive architecture of the site makes possible.

During the interview, C offered three concrete examples of this kind of relationship. The first one refers to a reader who, after buying a book (based on a C's mobile novel) connects to the Internet, becomes a regular user of the site. While maintaining her anonymity, she establishes a so good relationship with the writer, that she keeps sending C every year a present for her birthday.

The second kind of relationship refers to a reader who, confiding in C, asks her to write a mobile novel based on her own story. C interviews the reader and at the same time helps her to overcome the trauma of the past. Thus C becomes this particular type of reader's confidante.

The third one refers to the online events that the writer arranges for her readers on the notice board of her home page, to strengthen the bond between them and their loyalty to the reading of her novels. Among them she mentions chat events, during which C rewards with good year cards those readers who reply correctly to questions about her stories, and others, in which she encourages readers to write stories and rewards the best one, promoting it on her website.

It is clear that we are seeing a new relationship between the author and its reader, which is inconceivable in the traditionally written novel.

It is important to remark that the development of such a relationship is

impossible in the case of a physical book not only with the cultural implications of this medium, which sees the author as the absolute God of the world he is going to present to the reader. But there is also a physical and technological problem by which a physical book can never be equipped with the necessary functions to allow total interaction like the one we have seen through C's experience.

Conclusion

The first lines of the novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, by the Cuban-born Italian writer Italo Calvino, are probably one of the most illuminating texts on the strict relation existing between the physicality of the medium, in this case a book, and the reader. That is, in virtue of the physical characteristics of the literary medium (a book made of paper) the reader is ready to accept totally the author's world, to the point of creating the best conditions to dive into the world the writer has prepared for him/her.

Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. In an easy chair, on the sofa, in the rocker, the deck chair, on the hassock. In the hammock, if you have a hammock. On top of your bed, of course, or in the bed. You can even stand on your hands, head down, in the yoga position. With the book upside down, naturally.

Of course, the ideal position for reading is something you can never find. In the old days they used to read standing up, at a lectern. People were accustomed to standing on their feet, without moving. They rested like that when they were tired of horseback riding. Nobody ever thought of reading on horseback; and yet now, the idea of sitting in the saddle, the book propped against the horse's mane, or maybe tied to the horse's ear with a special harness, seems attractive to you. With your feet in the stirrups, you should feel quite comfortable for reading; having your feet up is the first condition for enjoying a read.

Well, what are you waiting for? Stretch your legs, go ahead and put your feet on a cushion. On two cushions, on the arms of the sofa, on the wings of the chair, on the coffee table, on the desk, on the piano, on the globe. Take your shoes off first. If you want to, put your feet up; if not, put them back. Now don't stand there with your shoes in one hand and the book in the other.

Adjust the light so you won't strain your eyes. Do it now, because once you're absorbed in reading there will be no budging you. Make sure the page isn't in shadow, a clotting of black letters on a gray background, uniform as a pack of mice; but be careful that the light cast on it isn't too strong, doesn't glare on the cruel white of the paper, gnawing at the shadows of the letters as in a

southern noonday. Try to foresee now everything that might make you interrupt your reading. Cigarettes within reach, if you smoke, and the ashtray. Anything else? Do you have to pee? All right, you know best. [20]

In simple words Calvino provides us with a clear portrait of the process implied in the existence of a book. Though full of expectations, the reader's position with respect to the author's fully accomplished work, is always a passive one. If the expectations are not fulfilled, the reader can later criticize or even throw the book away. As Eco [21] has reminded us, the reader should write on the book's margins, take notes on its blank spaces. However, the author's position is never endangered; this type of reader can never change the course of the story.

Things are different in digital literature.

As clearly seen in the exploration of the mobile novels site and the interview with C. Maho no irando, the platform represents the virtual space connecting C and her readers. Through this virtual space, a new intimate relationship, something that had did not exist before, has developed between author and reader. Tomita calls this relation "intimate stranger" being intimacy and strangeness or anonymity two very important points defining it. In Calvino's introductory lines to *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, there is a strong intimacy between the reader and the physical book, or the world it contains. However, it is difficult to see and imagine that reader being connected to the author other than through her work. On the contrary, the personal connections and the community supporting a mobile novel are very important points in the reading process since they are a fundamental part of the leisure derived from the consumption of mobile novels. As for strangeness, while not representing a real issue in books' readership, its importance for the mobile novel is notable since it is the strongest incentive to the formation of a community around the novel or to the connection with the author. With anonymity a particularity in the way the Japanese use social media, testified also by the recent success of Twitter over Facebook, it is the perfect condition allowing the reader to open up to his author.

Finally, the mobile novel allows the author and reader to influence, merge, and interact with each other. The real-time feedback of the Internet can change the course of the story; the author is very much concerned with readers' feedback and tries to gratify her readership. The mobile novel might not be the next new literary phenomenon, though it has been so in Japan in 2005 to 2007. Still it shows us the new possibilities for the book, literature, and the publishing market, possibilities that must take this interaction into account. The mobile novel projects us into the future, but also brings back something of the past, like the common and communal space the storyteller and his listeners shared in the era of oral literature.

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