Domesticating communication technologies in Korean families

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INTRODUCTION

In recent media discourse in the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea), new technology has been frequently equated with the loss of local identity in favour of an individualized mode of communication. In media representation, young people in particular tend to be described as moving rapidly out of a family-oriented social framework, assumed to be essential to Korean identity. However, empirical evidence provided in cultural studies of youth and technology shows a different aspect. Indeed, it has been demonstrated in those studies (e.g. Facer et al, 2003; Holloway and Valentine, 2003; Yoon, 2003a), both in Korea and elsewhere, that most forms of technology are embedded within household and family contexts, rather than being consumed completely individually. In addition, such studies argue that the home has increasingly become the central place of youth culture, because of young people’s extended period of dependency, and therefore of the provision of more material resources by the family than ever before. In this regard, it is significant to keep in mind that technologies are incorporated into the ‘moral economy’ of the household, ‘operating according to moral and economic values more or less distinct from the dominant sets of public values.’ This theorization of technology in the process of ‘domestication’ suggests that the internal dynamics of households are differentiated according to gender, generation and social class.

This study examines how young Koreans engage in the environment of ‘new’ and ‘old’ communication technologies, including the home computer, the domestic telephone and the mobile phone. In particular, it explores the way in which traditional norms and the material conditions of the family affect young people’s access to, and ways of using, communication technologies and how power relations in terms of gender and generation are re-articulated in the domestication of communication technologies. The data used in this article were generated from qualitative research in Seoul, based on in-depth interviews conducted in 2002 with 33 young people aged 16–17,
on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. The sample was collected in the urban middle-class area on the south bank of the Han river and among lower-middle-class families on the north bank.

THE FAMILY AND COMMUNICATION IN THE KOREAN CONTEXT

Despite the nation’s rapid urbanization and subsequent changes in family structures, family-oriented society still remains crucial in every aspect of Korean everyday life. Indeed, while modernization has resulted in the nuclear family becoming the most common form of household (82 per cent in 2000), the majority of Korean nuclear families remain closely bound to extended familial networks.

In the present study, the role of familial norms in young Koreans’ everyday lives was noticeable, with the identification of an individual with his or her family in Korean society appearing in my respondents’ narratives. Young people in the study noted that they were often being evaluated in public places not as individuals but as ‘the property’ of their family:

If old women or middle-aged women with heavy bags get on the bus, we think we had better give our seat to them. But some old people get angry and lose patience before I have even offered them my seat. Then I feel upset … They tend to say, ‘You, student! How dare you sit when there is an old person carrying heavy bags in front of you … What sort of family are you from?’ It is really annoying. It hurts me when they criticise my parents rather than me. They always say, ‘You are badly educated! Where were you brought up?’

(North Bank female 10, 16 years old)

It was also apparent in my research, as in the excerpt below, that young people themselves internalized this family-oriented value in that they perceived the family to be an indivisible extension of the self.

Sometimes kids call their mum ‘that woman’ without calling her ‘my Mum’. I can’t stand it when they talk like that. They even say, ‘Why is my Grandma [living in the same house] living so long!’ when they are told off by their grandma. I am easily upset about these peers and I often argue with them about this … I am generally liberal, but, you know, I really hate someone who does not do what we should do.

(South Bank female 07, 17 years old)

As such, criticizing other family members was regarded as taboo, since the family was embodied as an extension of the self for many of my interviewees. Interviewees also described the family not only as a place of emotional bonding but also as a place of material resources shared between the family members. The sharing of resources within the family appeared evident in the use of physical rooms and of communication technologies, amongst other things. Above all, for most informants, especially those from the North Bank, home did not generally provide much personal space: