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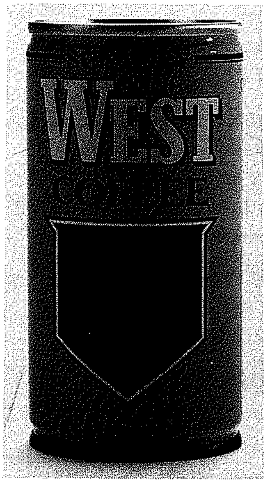
RE-MADE IN JAPAN

EVERYDAY LIFE AND CONSUMER TASTE
IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOSEPH J. TOBIN



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4

TRACTORS, TELEVISION, AND TELEPHONES: REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE IN RURAL JAPAN

WILLIAM W. KELLY

> What is needed to understand the transforming power of media technology, from print to electronics, on cultures generally is a subtle understanding of the interplay between ideas, symbolic modalities with their varied potentialities, and the ability of the media to create new social relationships and contexts (as well as to alter old ones). Of that subtle understanding there is as yet little in the anthropology of complex cultures, at least in any systematic form.
>
> —Ulf Hannerz, "The World in Creolization"

Perhaps the most famous telephone conversation in Japanese literature occurred in *The Makioka Sisters,* Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's evocative novel of merchant family life in the 1930s. It consists simply of the brief, awkward, and muffled response of Makioka Yukiko to the innocuous invitation of one of her suitors, Mr. Hashidera, to accompany him on a walk: "The maid who answered the telephone said that Yukiko was at home, and then there was no Yukiko. He waited and waited. When she finally came to the telephone he asked if she was free that evening. 'Well,' she said, and it was impossible to tell whether she meant yes or no. As he pressed her for a clearer answer, she finally said, in a voice he could barely hear, that there were reasons why she could not see him. She said not another word. He left the telephone in great anger" (Tanizaki 1966, 413).

The most memorable moment of telephone talk in my years of fieldwork in a rural region of Japan was the embarrassed predicament of Tokuzō, the fifty-five-year-old *jiichan,* or grandpa, of a three-generation household with whom I have occasionally lived. The telephone rang in the family room (*chanoma*) where the two of us sat talking. As was his habit, Tokuzō ignored it, waiting for someone else to answer it. By the sixth ring and after some uncomfortable glances, he reluctantly picked it up with a gruff grunt. The female caller, I later surmised, asked for Keiko, his daughter-in-law, and identified herself as Keiko's sister.

There were several terms of reference and address for Keiko within the household, including "our bride" (*orai no yome*), "Mom" (*kāchan*), and, only rarely, her given name. Tokuzō, however, avoided addressing his daughter-in-law (and, for that matter, his wife and his oldest son) by any term, relying instead on mute hand gestures and head nods. This telephone call thus put him in an extremely uncomfortable situation. Except for the interloping ethnographer, who only later would be expected to answer the phone, no one else was within sight. After futilely searching for anyone to whom he might silently hand the phone, he finally called out, "Uh-uh-uh, Daiei!" the name of the department store where Keiko worked (which had no relation to the caller or substance of the call!). He was saved only when his six-year-old granddaughter eventually appeared and took over.

This power of the telephone to daunt older men and younger women (and uncertain foreigners) always comes to mind when I see the advertising slogans in Japanese magazines for electronic hardware and computer software that is "high-touch" high tech, which I take to be a Japanese version of "user-friendly." The telephone, of course, is but one of the many new production and consumption technologies that have spread rapidly and pervasively throughout urban and rural Japan. Of perhaps greater import to residents of the region I know best, Shōnai in Yamagata Prefecture, have been the tractor and the television. These advances form the three Ts of technology that I shall discuss.

Such a triad of technology is admittedly contrived, although it does follow the time-honored East Asian penchant for mnenomic formulas, so crassly appropriated by postwar Japanese advertising. These have included the three Ss of the late 1950s and early 1960s: *senpūki, sen-*

takuki, and *suihanki* (fan, washing machine, and electric rice cooker); the three Cs of the late 1960s: *kā, kūrā,* and *karā terebi* (car, air conditioner, and color TV); and the three Js of the late 1970s: *jūeru, jetto,* and *jūtaku* (jewels, jetting, and a house). Nonetheless, tractors, televisions, and telephones do provoke some significant questions about technology and social change, three of which I introduce in the following section. These issues are hardy perennials and thus unlikely to be tamed by academic discourse, especially in this brief discussion. Still, the conjunction of these three issues of technology with three items of technology forces one to think about the nature of that "*zone* of cultural debate" that Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge have labeled "public culture" (1988, 6), the subject on which I shall conclude.

Considerations of technology and human life frequently revolve around three issues: a debate, an irony, and an ideology. The debate concerns the effects of technology on social relations and personal development: that is, are they good or bad? Do they bring potential growth or probable enslavement? Can technology create a global village, or will it reinforce a divided world? In extending human powers, does it enhance radical potentials or entrench the status quo? Such questions lie behind debates about mass communication technologies, as between Marshall McLuhan's 1966 *Understanding Media* and Brian Winston's 1986 *Misunderstanding Media* (which might also be entitled "Misunderstanding McLuhan"). Not surprisingly, these debates about new technologies in modern life tend to parallel those about social institutions in mass society. Some view public schooling, for example, as an escalator or solvent, empowering and enfranchising the dispossessed; others feel that it reproduces an elite and sanctions inequality.

As McLuhan's "cool media" become computer mania, Micaela di Leonardo (1985) sees the debate recast as a clash of two discourses: "second self" versus "labor's bane." On the one hand, she argues, Sherry Turkle's study (1984) of the computer as second self focuses on its power to shape sensibility, consciousness, and self-definition; computer culture becomes interactive in a profound sense. A different line of analysis is inspired by, among others, Harry Braverman's work on automation and "deskilling" (1974); these are labor-centered, critical accounts of the hazards and coercion of computerized workplaces. Di Leonardo's point is that second-self and labor's-bane evaluations talk past each another. It is a difference, I suppose, between a concern with how computer-age machines can be used by people to *think* about people and a concern with how such machines can be used by people to *control* people. In Japan, this contrast is illustrated by the gulf between robotics engineer Mori Masahiro's claims that robots have Buddha-nature (Schodt 1988, 206–212) and Jon Woronoff's fulminations (1981) about the deskilled and displaced "wasted workers."

An irony pervading both perspectives, however, is that technology is often both intrusive and disaggregating. Depending on one's point of view, the computerized work station and the home leisure center may either foster autonomy or enforce isolation. In either case, these technologies of individuation, by their very penetration, have a homogenizing effect. *Kōjinka* (privatization), which is the common denominator behind "my car" (*mai kā*), "office automation" (*OA*), and the ill-named "family computer" (*famicon*), is attained only at the price of *hyōjunka* (standardization).

The ideology, of course, is that of modernization and rationalization. In the case of Japan, technological innovation and adaptation are hardly new: metallurgy techniques and civil engineers from the Korean peninsula were critical in the Yamato clan's transition from kinship to kingship in the sixth and seventh centuries; the European Jesuit "soldiers of Christ" in the sixteenth century were valued more for their weapons than for their words; and the steam engines and "live machines" imported by Meiji modernizers fulfilled their fondest dreams of *wakon yōsai,* "Japanese spirit, Western learning," perhaps the origin of the expression "Japanese high touch, Western high tech."

Yet in both politics and semiotics, most post–World War II technologies have been associated with a self-consciously rational expertise, a style legitimated by its own formal characteristics of professional roles, bureaucratic institutions, and systematized procedures. In this sense, modern technologies are not all powerful but unstable and self-limiting, both because they yield diminishing returns and because this conception of the modern is incompatible with other, equally salient meanings (for example, modern participatory citizenship, *minshūshugi*).

Shōnai emerged in the twentieth century as one of Japan's few major rice-producing regions. By the 1980s, farm work directly engaged only a small portion of its population; but rice farming remains central to the identity of the region and to the activities of most public agencies and the local business community. Two changes in Shōnai agriculture have been particularly striking: a rationalization of work routines and relations and a solidification of smallholder or proprietor consciousness. By the first, I mean the increasing detachment of farm work from the household—in Shōnai, farming has become the sole province of the young adult male—and its embeddedness in a nexus of institutional expertise that links the agricultural cooperative, the land-improvement district, the extension service, and so on. By the second, I mean the contemporary farmer has become both manager and laborer, committed to continuing his control over and contribution to the farm-work process. These changes appear to entail divergent routines and consciousness; the former is more new middle class, the latter more old middle class. In fact, I believe that the first development has enabled the second to persist, while the latter has mitigated some of the acute tensions caused by the rationalization of routines. At the root of both changes has been the tractor.

These changes in Shōnai farm work are rather unanticipated results of two twentieth-century Green Revolutions on the plain, two periods of radical reform in technology and social organization that transformed rice growing and the paddy landscape. In the earlier period, 1895–1920, large landlords introduced the horse-drawn plow to replace the back-breaking spading that rice fields required. Under the banner of "the improvement of agricultural affairs" (*nōji kairyō*) they attempted to standardize tenancy procedures, to raise rice quality and yields, and to enhance the profitability of their operations. Instead, their reforms stimulated forms of counterorganization that shifted leverage to smallholder owner-tenants. In the second revolution of 1965–1980, state ministries vigorously promoted a "rationalization of agriculture" (*nōgyō gōrika*) through mechanization, led by the tractor. The ministries thus meant to encourage an exodus of labor from farming to industry and a consolidation of farms in the hands of a few large-scale, full-time operators. Again, intentions have been thwarted. Most households have instead held on to their paddies and used tractors and other new machinery, as well as generous price supports, to allow their young adult males to continue small-scale farming, while other members find jobs outside the farm (Kelly 1986).

During both rice revolutions, cultural oppositions were constructed to pit the rational and the modern against the customary and the feudal. In their respective periods, the plow and the tractor were tangible signs of the former. Yet the social outcomes of the rational and the modern were unexpected, because neither the large landlords nor the state ministries could control how and for whom the technologies were to be used. At both times, the new technology was appropriated by smallholders, who were thereby able to redefine and reassert their livelihood.

That is, concerns within households differed from considerations within policy-making circles. From the mid-1960s through the early 1970s, parents throughout the Shōnai countryside feared that metropolitan jobs would attract their children, leaving no successor to the family farm. Many parents were willing to purchase a full line of rice machinery for their sons, with the expectation that rising yields would finance repayment. Many sons were willing to remain in hopes that mechanized farming would offer a modern occupation and that machines would allow them to farm independently, autonomous of their fathers, whose expertise was rendered obsolete and whose authority they might thus usurp. These two rice revolutions have been struggles for and about the meanings of the rational and the customary and have produced an occupation whose procedures and social relations may be the most rational on the plain.

In postwar Shōnai, younger males have used tractors and other machinery to assert a new work image and to appropriate significant household authority vis-à-vis their siblings who have moved to the cities, their wives, who no longer want or need to help with the rice farming, and their parents, whose skills are outdated and whose contributions are only occasional. The new mechanization has separated the young male but not isolated him. Rather, his nexus of work relations has been reconfigured to link him, as a specialist producer, with financial, agronomic, policy, and engineering professionals. (This is an all-male field, despite some feminine high touches. The stock advertisement for rice machines shows a cute young woman riding a tractor or walking behind a transplanter, one hand lightly on the controls and the other waving gaily to the reader-buyer. As another example, control panels on the latest tractors and combines feature a dulcet, high-pitched "nightingale voice" that reminds the operator of low fuel, brake and throttle position, and the like.)

At the same time, these young men are well aware that mechanization is responsible for their heavy financial debts. As they admit, they are the highly vulnerable "machine poor" (*kikai binbō*). Their identity as modern farmers has an underside: the off-season reality of low-wage labor for taxi companies, paving contractors, textbook distributors, and print shops, to cite only a few examples. Though not happy about their predicament, they are seldom mystified about the choices they made from the alternatives they were offered.

If the production technology of the tractor brought scientific agriculture to the fields, the consumption technology of television brought mass culture to the family room. Television broadcasting began in Japan in 1953, the year the Korean War ended, and quickly became a principal vehicle for translating economic prosperity into consumption imperatives and then transmitting these imperatives to households nationally. Television, together with the washing machine, was the leading commodity in the consumer "electrification boom" (*denka būmu*) that began in 1953. In 1956, there were three hundred thousand television sets in the country; four years later, there were 3.6 million sets, a twelvefold increase, representing their use in over 40 percent of the nation's households. In particular, the live broadcasts of the Crown Prince's marriage in April 1959 were used to generate an enormous demand for this medium. By the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics—another marketing bonanza for manufacturers—televisions were found in over three-quarters of all households.

The extremes of sophistication and idiocy may be greater in Japanese television broadcasting than in that of any other industrial society. Certainly the same epithets used to describe American television have been applied to the Japanese terebi—boob tube, consumer tastemaker, electronic babysitter, political sedative, and so on (see, among many others, Kitamura and Nakano 1983). My observation, however, is about reception, not deception—about the spatial reorientation that television has prompted in the central family room of many Shōnai households, 95 percent of which had at least one set by 1971.

Nearly every study of rural Japan comments on the fixed seating arrangements of the family room—the customary positions of family members and guests around the open rectangular hearth, or more recently, the electric foot-warming table (*kotatsu*). This arrangement is oriented toward the ceremonial alcove (*tokonoma*) and the household ancestor shrine (*butsudan*) beside it. The seat with its back to the alcove, and thus framed by it, was the seat of prestige and authority, the *kamiza* of the household head. Specific patterns varied with class and area. Frequently, to the right of the household head was the guest seat and then that of live-in workers and non-successor children. To his left were his parents, his oldest son or another designated successor, his wife, and so on.

Even the most recently rebuilt houses retain this alcove, but now it is often used as a convenient location for the television set. What this means, of course, is that everyone has a good viewing angle except the household head. From my experience, he frequently moves to the side, shifting the focus of attention from the centripetal kotatsu toward the television set in the alcove. The seating order is permanently disrupted, just as the voice of the TV "caster" (*kyasutā*) challenges the voice of the jiichan as the authority of the chanoma. The intrusion of television into the chanoma has thus contributed directly to a broader reconfiguration of familial authority, which is further reinforced by the tractor in the barn.[1]

In the Shōnai villages I am familiar with, the installation of household telephones has had greater significance for women than for men, and for older women in particular—the *obāsan* generations over fifty years of age. They drive less frequently than other adults and are now the most housebound members of society, providing day care for their grandchildren while the young parents work and their husbands, the grandfathers, busy themselves with miscellaneous tasks and public service. The telephone frequently becomes both a substitute for and a supplement to other channels of communication and sociability. It has become an indispensable tool of "kinwork," which is as much a female responsibility in Japanese households as in di Leonardo's Italian-American families (1984).

In ways familiar to most of us and dear to the profits of the phone company, the telephone allows long-distance contact with children who have grown up and moved away. This is, of course, a highly charged issue in a region such as Shōnai, where parents are equally proud and wistful of their children's educational success. The *sankin kōtai* of the old provincial elite (the early-modern shogunate's requirement that domain lords leave their families in the capital city and alternate their own residences between Edo and their home domain) has become the *kyōiku esukarētā,* the "education escalator" of the new meritocracy. In Shōnai the dilemma of education is that the most successful are the most inclined to leave. One household which I often visit has two children—both daughters, both graduates of four-year universities in Tokyo. One is single and works in Tokyo; the other is married to a doctor and lives in nearby Akita Prefecture. The mother is in constant telephone contact with both. She and her husband frequently worry out loud about growing old without the companionship and support of their children. The telephone, they recognize, is a welcome solace though a poor substitute; for at least one of the daughters, it is also a handy justification for her absence and independence.

The telephone is also an important instrument in "village work," as well as in kinwork, and has provided some relief from the protocols of everyday hospitality. In another Shōnai settlement where I recently lived, the twenty-six households were involved in fifteen different organizations, to count only the most local ones. The telephone was a useful shortcut for conducting business, without the obligatory socializing (and for men, drinking) that follows most club and association meetings. (It must be added, however, that the telephone could also be an irritating reminder of meetings and agendas.)

Beyond the dense organizational connections, the constant comings and goings among neighbors (to pass time and to pass along information) proceed with tokens of neighborliness—a few apples, a bag of crackers or cookies or chips—the junk food that fills the racks of every general store in Japan. A caller at the door (more precisely, a visitor in the *genkan,* or entrance hall) thus prompts another of life's prosaic anxieties: who should be encouraged to come up from the entrance hall to the family room or guest room; when and how should one extend the invitation; and when and how should the guest resist this courtesy? This is not the stuff of major confrontations, but throughout the day it requires immediate, subtle calculations by the adult women of the household. These domestic gatekeepers (genkan guards?) must manage the flow of interhousehold information, maintain a semblance of sociability, and accomplish numerous domestic chores. More so than the men, they have become increasingly adept at using the telephone to substitute for at least some of this obligatory visiting.

Sons separated from households, household heads unseated, women reforming patterns of socializing—these tantalizing ethnographic fragments can be connected to the larger concerns of this volume with a concluding trio of issues. First, the notion that there is something called "technology" apart from the social relations of production and consumption is obviously as misleading to an anthropological inquiry as was the notion of a "natural environment" apart from the people who live in and enliven it. Efforts to measure the potential of any single technology to ennoble or enslave are better left to those involved with flow charts and simulation games—the new alchemists of social planning. Technology is neither determinative of nor neutral to the social patterns of its use or the cultural terms by which it is used. "Mechanization" (*kikaika*), "mass communications" (*masu comi*), and "lifeways improvement" (*seikatsu kaizen*) have all been potent slogans of a new-middle-class vision of postwar Japan, and the three Ts have been local and concrete expressions of those slogans and the societal model that gives them coherence. But a judgment of the ways in which such technologies have facilitated active compliance, passive accommodation, or determined resistance to that model requires a theory that reconciles the meanings that people have given those technologies with the power structures that shape and constrain those meanings.

Moreover, for such a theory to be relevant to contemporary state societies, one must recognize that technology is at once an object and a means of debate in what Appadurai and Breckenridge have called the "contested terrain" of public culture (1988, 7). I take their formulation as trying to specify the increasingly complex cross talk among the permeable cultural spheres of modern life. Public culture is a "zone" of posters and commercials (Ivy 1988), programs and speeches, cookbooks (Appadurai 1988) and textbooks, political marches and popular festivities (Kelly 1990b). In Japan, it is the transmissions across and interrogations between the national culture of the state, a mass culture of the media, a metropolitan culture of greater Tokyo, and the regional cultures of places like Shōnai. Public culture is a zone but also a process—that of continual transpositions across such cultural registers.

This may provide a better way of talking about technology than our more-familiar language of the "social consequences of new technology" or the "unintended effects of technological change." That is, it is a notion not of the social translation but of the cultural transposition of technology that draws our attention to the distinct, though articulated, constellations of interests in the several "cultures" in which a technology may be imbedded. The efficiency of tractors, the etiquette of telephone talk, and the popularity (or vulgarity) of television programs may be common idioms of debate in national, mass, regional, and domestic forums. Still, we must distinguish—and relate—the tractor as an instrument of state agricultural policy, as the subject of intense advertising campaigns by major manufacturers, and as the object of struggles between adult men and their parents and wives. Public culture is not just the *zone* in which the tractor moves from one arena of interests to another but the *process* by which these interests engage one another and mutually, though differentially, infiltrate one another's expression (Kelly 1990b).

Finally, in part because political mobilization in prewar Japan has given way to economic mobilization in postwar Japan, technology—high technology—has been an especially important theme of contemporary public culture. High tech is new tech, the latest tech; it is the horizon of the obtainable, no longer purely visionary but not yet the ordinary. To people in Shōnai, the three Ts were the high tech of the early to mid 1970s. Tractors, televisions, and telephones were literally the vehicles by which the seeds of scientific production were implanted and the sights and sounds of the city transmitted. If these machines are still not friendly, they are at least familiar; not human extensions, but social necessities. For Shōnai of the late 1980s and early 1990s, high tech has come to mean computers in the workplace; the biogenetic engineering that, it is claimed, will provide laboratory jobs and a last hope for regional agriculture; and the airplane, in the controversial form of the Shōnai Regional Airport, which opened in 1991.

"Modernization" (*kindaika*) and "mainstream consciousness" (*chūryū ishiki*) were the rubrics for promoting the old high tech through state policy and mass media. Underlying this new high tech is yet another slogan of the state, Japan as the "information society" (*jōhō shakai*). This carries an explicit promise to disperse employment opportunities and to regionalize development as a nationwide network of postmanufacturing "technopolises." In this vision of a twenty-first-century Japan, whether technology will be the vehicle for social change and regional distinctiveness or the instrument of political stability and metropolitan hegemony has already begun to divide both public debate and everyday conversation.

NOTE

1. David Plath (1990) has perceptively observed that the family automobile, in becoming an extension and even replacement for the family living room, has put the father back in the driver's seat.

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