

Illustration: Kato Susumu

THERE are a half dozen men and women sitting on the platform benches at a railway station in the suburbs of Tokyo during the rush hour. Every single one of them is holding a cellphone in the left hand, nervously punching the keys to send someone a text message. In Japan, this is an everyday sight. The diffusion of cellphones has greatly changed the Japanese lifestyle.

Recently, incidents involving cellphones have significantly increased in number. An on-duty conductor for West Japan Railway Co. (JR West) was caught using the cellphone issued by the company for emergency use to access pornography on the Internet. He was dismissed as a disciplinary measure.

Almost every cellphone now has a built-in camera, and illicit photography has become a serious problem. Cellphone manufacturers produce the built-in cameras with a function that clicks when a photo is taken, but tricks can be found on the Internet to disable the sound.

Cellphones have also made it possible for men and women who are total strangers to meet one another, and such easily accessible



## Is the Cellphone Mightier than the Pen?

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

online dating sites have become hotbeds of child prostitution.

According to a survey carried out by the National Police Agency, 60% of middle-school students who have been involved in acts of delinquency have cellphones – double the percentage of ordinary students. Some people are of the opinion that students who carry cellphones are more likely to behave violently and grow irritated and that the phones are “tools leading to delinquency.”

Japanese young people use cellphones in ways that differ slightly from their counterparts in other countries. They tend to use the devices more for sending text messages than for making phone calls. There are a large number of high school and college students who send text messages to friends whom they have just parted from and they experience unbearable anxiety if a response is not almost immediate.

Professor Masataka Nobuo's *Keitai wo Motta Saru* (Monkey with a Cellphone) has sold quite well. His book points out that young people are constantly sending text messages through cellphones because “they feel intensely uneasy if they are not in constant contact with others.” He says the messages themselves are virtually pointless and differ hardly at all from the sounds that monkeys make to confirm their companions' whereabouts.

A report of an international academic achievement comparison survey, The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), carried out by the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2003, revealed that the reading comprehension ability of Japan's 15-year-olds had dropped dramatically from 8th place to 14th from the previous survey in

2000. Communication by text messages was cited as a factor for the drop.

These messages make use of symbols called *kao-moji* or emoticons rather than words to show delicate feelings. They are filled with kao-moji like o(^-^o o(>\_<o o(T\_T)o which aggressively tread Japanese words.

The vice principal of one middle school comments, “There are a lot of problems that develop because the messages the students send through cellphones do not fully communicate what they intend.”

Teachers are also worried that students no longer buy books because they spend between several thousand to ¥10,000 every month out of their allowances on their phone charges and do not have money left to buy books.

While there is concern regarding the impact of cellphones on the acquisition of Japanese language ability, there are some positive aspects as well. A major Japanese publishing company, Kadokawa Shoten, awarded the first of its newly established *Seishun Bungaku Sho* (Youth's Literary Awards) to a 17-year-old high-school boy in February 2006. He had written an entire book with two thumbs punching the keys on his cellphone. *The Asahi Shimbun* praised his work by commenting, “The distinctive modulation of the plot twist is probably due to the fact that it was written on a cellphone, with its characteristic repetition of short sprints.”

We now have tanka poetry and text-message haiku composed on cellphones, and they are gaining popularity. It seems that the era when the cellphone is arguably stronger than the pen may not be entirely a losing situation. **JS**

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