Chinese get the message on texting

Far more than Americans, they prefer faster methods of communicating rather than e-mail.

By Dawn C. Chmielewski, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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BEIJING -- Real estate agent Xu Jianzhong is wired -- but in a way that few in the e-mail addicted, BlackBerry-packing West would understand.

The 20-year-old from China's rural Henan province doesn't own a computer. He visits the local Internet cafe to check his e-mail every couple of weeks.

That's not to say Xu is out of touch. He just prefers tapping out text messages to his friends on his Lenovo cellphone -- the most expensive piece of electronics gear he owns -- over typing an e-mail on a computer keyboard.

"When I communicate with my friends, I use short messages," Xu said. "I send messages in mornings and afternoons, asking, 'Do you want to come out to eat?'"

E-mail has become the new snail mail for many Chinese as they turn to the immediacy of text messages on cellphones and instant messages on personal computers. The most affluent and educated use e-mail, but by and large people here rely much more heavily on the shorter, faster and more conversational methods of electronic communication.

E-mail here is treated with the same disdain as the telephone answering machine, said Guo Liang, a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

"You won't have a direct response; you have to wait," he said.

China's mania for messaging -- particularly mobile messaging -- is largely a product of how technology developed here. Like other emerging global markets, rural regions of China lacked phones or even a television as recently as two decades ago. The country modernized just as mobile technology was broadly accessible throughout the world.

China is now the world's largest mobile phone market.

"When people are stepping up to buy their first phone in their life, why
bother with the land line?" said P.T. Black, a partner in Jigsaw International, a consumer lifestyle consulting firm based in Shanghai.

China's 455 million cellphone users chat, cajole, joke and flirt via short messages about 33 billion times a month, according to government statistics and iResearch Consulting Group, a market research firm that focuses on Chinese Internet and wireless industries. During the mid-autumn festival, people here exchanged 2 billion short message greetings and well-wishes in a single day.

More people in China get news or weather via the Web on their cellphones than from personal computers, said David Turchetti, chief executive of 21 Communications, a mobile marketing agency based in China. "Most Chinese people can't afford a PC for their home. It's a pretty big investment," he said. "Your mobile phone -- you almost can't live without it."

Even among those with access to computers and the Internet, e-mail takes a back seat to instant messaging when people converse with friends, colleagues or lovers, Guo said. The Brookings Institution plans to publish more of the Internet expert's findings on the subject in November.

Nearly 70% of China's online population regularly uses instant messaging, compared with only 56% for e-mail, according to the government's China Internet Network Information Center. That's a stark contrast to the U.S., where the 39% of those who use IM are dwarfed by the 91% of Internet users who communicate by e-mail.

Among the most popular IM programs here are Tencent Technology's QQ -- whose lively animations for common expressions, such as a cat waving when the user types "goodbye," make it popular among younger users -- and Microsoft Corp.'s MSN Messenger.

"Most young people will come up and ask you for your MSN [screen name] or your QQ number rather than your e-mail address," said Kaiser Kuo, director of digital strategy for Ogilvy & Mather Advertising in Beijing. "Young people often print it on their cards."

Many of those young people can be found pecking furiously at the mobile phone keyboard as they engage in short bursts of conversation. The cost is one reason. A short message costs as little as a penny a thought, whereas voice calls are comparatively pricey at 2 to 5 cents a minute.

It's not just teenagers and young adults who don't seem to mind composing their thoughts on a tiny device.

Ren Xiaomin, a 49-year-old construction worker from Beijing, said he recently traded his Motorola phone for one with a stylus and touch-screen that lets him communicate with his 26-year-old son using traditional Chinese characters. In fact, nearly 9 out of 10 Chinese who own cellphones send text messages, iResearch found. Only 49% of U.S. cellphone users send text messages, according to the Pew Internet Center.

Mobile phones have achieved iconic status in China, where technology is viewed as an important part of the country's rapid modernization. Jigsaw International's Black said it is not uncommon for young people to spend an entire month's salary on a cellphone, only to sell it online at a loss six months later so they can buy a newer model.

"The mobile phone has been the young person's biggest, most expensive possession," Black said. "The mobile phone is what people carry with them. This is the badge that [says], 'I'm moving up.'"

Any time millions of people use a technology, scams are sure to follow. Chinese officials have instituted new regulations designed to cut down on text-messaging schemes that offer fake cash prizes and illegal services...
such as gambling and prostitution.

Mobile communication also has emboldened some to engage in social activism, making it easier to mobilize political demonstrations. In the Philippines, President Joseph Estrada was forced from office in a 2001 popular uprising that he decried as a "coup de text."

Last June, thousands of Chinese protesters wearing gas masks and carrying banners staged a protest over plans to build a chemical plant in the port city of Xiamen.

Angry about what they described as an environmental "atomic bomb," locals claimed to have circulated a million mobile text messages urging friends and families to rally outside the city government's headquarters. Officials responded by blocking messages to keep people from joining the demonstration.

As with all other forms of communication in China, the government is watching. Some Chinese say officials expanded censorship over phone messages after the 2003 SARS epidemic, in which millions of text messages were sent alerting people to the virus and exposing a national cover-up.

"Once in a while, you'll get friendly reminders from the public security bureau," Ogilvy & Mather's Kuo said. "You always know what the event is that they're referring to, but they're very elliptical about it, reminding you not to spread rumors."

Sometimes an electronic quip can land the sender in prison.

One man -- Qin Zhongfei -- was jailed for a month in August 2006 for writing a poem that satirized local leaders, then sending it to friends via text and instant messages. The case was eventually dropped after it drew media attention.

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