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*Mobile Communication, Popular Protests and Citizenship in China**

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Abstract

Digital telecommunication technology has expanded the potential of the mobile phone to be used increasingly as a weapon against authoritarian rule and censorship. Since the content of mobile communication is unpredictable and unregulated, mobile phones have the capability to breach state-sponsored blockage of information. This in turn helps the Chinese people to maintain contact with each other, receive information from outside the country, and make political waves in an aggressive battle for control over information. This paper examines spontaneous mobilization via mobile phones, with a focus on two concrete popular protests in rural and urban areas, demonstrating how Chinese citizens have expanded the political uses of mobile phones in their struggle for freedom of information flow, social justice, and the rule of law, while seeking to build an inexpensive counter-public sphere. These processes destabilize China's conventional national public sphere by shaping political identities on an individual level as well as the notion of citizenship within the evolving counter-public sphere. The political significance of mobile phones in the context of contemporary China's political environment can be observed by various social forces that communicate their struggles with the aid of this technology, pose challenges in governance, and force the authorities to engage in new kinds of media practices.

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Mobile phone-assisted popular protests in China's new media era

Rapid innovations in the development of information and communication technologies have expanded the potential of the mobile phone: from being merely a device with which to share conversation it has become, increasingly, a weapon against authoritarian rule and censorship around the world.[1] The rapid expansion of the telephony backbone and the increasingly widespread use of mobile phones have led to a communication revolution in China, now the biggest mobile phone powerhouse in the world, with over 747 million mobile phone users—an average of almost one phone for every two people.[2] The advent of mobile media has now made it much more possible for an individual to become an active political participant. Unpredictable and unregulated mobile communication enables citizens to breach government censorship; receive information from the outside world; coordinate a wide range of activities, including large-scale protests; and create bottom-up, people-based political movements in an aggressive battle for control over information, while the publicity-sensitive government makes concerted attempts not only to register Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) cards and ID cards but also to block messages at their source.[3]

Despite the rapid growth of research on mobile communication as a tool for breaking censorship and improving the social participation of the Chinese people, in particular of the 'Information Have-less',[4] little

[1] Nyíri, K. (2005). *Mobile Democracy: Essays on Society, Self, and Politics*, Passagen Verlag, Vienna. De Vries, I. (2005). 'Mobile Telephony: Realising the Dream of Ideal Communication?', in Hamill, L. and Lasen, A. (eds), *Mobile World: Past, Present, Future*, Springer, London, pp. 42–62. Castells, M. (2009). *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[2] Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Gongye he Xinxihua bu (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of the People's Republic of China, MIIT) (2009). '*2009 nian Quanguo Dianxinye Tongji Gongbao* (2009 National Telecom Statistical Bulletin)', <http://www.miit.gov.cn/n11293472/n11293832/n11294132/n12858447/13011909.html>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

[3] Tai, Z. and Sun, T. (2007). 'Media Dependencies in a Changing Media Environment: The Case of the 2003 SARS Epidemic in China', *New Media and Society*, 9:6, pp. 987–1009. *Zhongguo Xinwen Zhoukan (China Newsweek)* (2007). '*Duanxin de Liliang* (The Power of Mobile Messaging)', 11 June, pp. 18–24. AFP (2008). 'China's Mobile Network: A Big Brother Surveillance Tool?', <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hymd7FGqkoxuoNDCZdq_QwISBPQw>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

[4] Cartier, C., Castells M. and Qiu, L. (2005). 'The Information Have-less: Inequality, Mobility, and Translocal Networks in Chinese Cities', *Studies in Comparative*

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is known about communication via mobile phones and its implication for political purposes in China.[5] Aiming to bridge that gap by looking specifically at the functions of political mobilization during the 2007 Xiamen anti-Paraxylene[6] (hereafter anti-PX) demonstration and the 2008 Weng'an mass incident, this paper examines the role of the mobile phone in creating a new way of mobilizing popular protest. These case-studies demonstrate how the mobile phone-mediated counter-public sphere gives quick and irrepressible responses to politically sensitive topics, and expresses opinions that run counter to official announcements, including criticism of the government. Since mobile phones are increasingly used to mobilize conventional forms of protest events, this type of activism is considered as a '*mobile phone-assisted popular protest*'. This paper contributes to contemporary research on political protests by emphasizing the integration of mobile communication technologies into discussions of digital democracy and the public sphere. It applies this approach to an empirical study of critical mobile phone-assisted popular protests and analyses the influence of mobile phones on China's public sphere.

Digital communication, mobile democracy, and the public sphere

Democracy is enacted through digital communication technology in many forms. However, democracy is not possible without a functioning political public sphere that puts the individual in a position that enables them to make decisions and act autonomously.[7] Based upon the ideal of a 'deliberative'—as opposed to merely 'informed'—public,

International Development, 40:2, pp. 9–34. Qiu, L. (2009). *Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[5] Yu, H. (2004). 'The Power of Thumbs: The Politics of SMS in Urban China', *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies*, 2:2, pp. 30–43. Ma, R. (2008). 'Spread of SARS and War-Related Rumors through New Media in China', *Communication Quarterly*, 56:4, pp. 376–91. Latham, K. (2007). 'SMS, Communication, and Citizenship in China's Information Society', *Critical Asian Studies*, 39:2, pp. 295–314.

[6] Paraxylene is used in the production of plastics, polyester, and other synthetic materials.

[7] Meyer, T. and Hinchman, L. (2002). *Media Democracy: How the Media Colonize Politics*, Polity Press in association with Blackwell, Cambridge. Calhoun, C. (2005). 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', <http://www.ssrc.org/calhoun/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/rethinking_the_public_sphere_05_speech.pdf >, [Accessed 5 March 2012].

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the notion of the public sphere in Jürgen Habermas' theory is a 'public' space between the state and civil society in which citizens can critically debate issues of common concern. More precisely, as a crucial player in the public sphere understood in this way, the media's role—key in discursive democracy—should be to help citizens gather to discuss issues of political concern and exchange views on matters of importance to the common good, to publicize different political views garnered from the public, to operate as representative vehicles of the views of the participating citizens, to assist in effective protests, and to outline various alternative arguments and actions in the decision-making process for those in marginalized, isolated or ignored groups.[8] Therefore, a well-functioning public sphere is dependent not only on access to pertinent mass media information about the actions of governmental institutions, but it is also dependent on opportunities for citizens to engage in rational and critical deliberation that results in the formation of public opinion and the shaping of governmental conduct.[9]

The surge of attention on the impact and implementation of information and communication technologies on societies and the public sphere, both in industrial democracies and developing countries, has triggered predictions about the democratic potential of digital new media in terms of creating unprecedented opportunities for public discourse and political participation.[10] Many studies note that in the information age the Internet in China has increasingly become the prime access point for the public into government bureaucracies and their services.[11] While this may be true of the 44 per cent of the population with Internet access, what these studies hardly consider is that the remaining 56 per cent of the population (which adds up to 652 million rural inhabitants) are yet to be connected

[8] Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 27. Curran, J. and Gurevitch, M. (1991). *Mass Media and Society*, Arnold, London, p. 103.

[9] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Negt, O. and Kluge, A. (1993). *Public Sphere and Experience – Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

[10] Dahlberg, L. (2001). 'Democracy via Cyberspace', *New Media and Society*, 3:2, pp. 157–77. Gimmler, A. (2007). 'Deliberative Democracy, the Public Sphere and the Internet', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 27:4, pp. 21–39.

[11] Zheng, Y. (2008). *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*, Stanford University Press, Stanford. Yang, G. (2009). *The Power of the Internet in China*, Columbia University Press, Columbia.

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to the Internet in the world's most populous country,[12] meaning that the cyber public sphere, still in its infancy, is currently facing technological and demographic limitations.[13] On the other hand, commercialization has recently moved the Internet towards a more diversified and market-driven profile. For instance, Baidu, China's top search engine, originally established to give access to all sites, has been paid to suppress negative news and information about Sanlu's contaminated milk powder in their search engine.[14] Those who use this digital searching tool to find accurate information might not be fully aware that the search engine has become a kind of weapon before they fall into the trap of those who use the Internet to pursue their dubious interests. Those who gain Internet access through service providers are subject to the government's sophisticated Internet monitoring and filtering system, which blocks access to websites containing information considered detrimental or hostile to the country.[15] The art of subtle Internet control as an important part of 'new authoritarianism'[16] in China today is often underrated. This practice consists of the Chinese government opening up selected

[12] China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2009). '*Zhongguo Hulianwangluo Fazhan Tongji Baogao* (The [23rd] Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China)', <http://www.cnnic.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2009/1/13/92458.pdf>, [Accessed 5 March 2012]. Xinhua (2007). '*Guojia Tongjiju: Zhongguo Nongcun Renkou zhan Zongrenkou 56%* (National Bureau of Statistics: China's Rural Inhabitants Take up 56 percent of the Total Population)', <http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007–10/22/content_6921882.htm>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

[13] CNNIC, 'The [23rd] Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China'. Bruce Bimber, for example, coins the phrase 'accelerated pluralism' to show that the Internet will facilitate grassroots mobilization and civic organization, and it will particularly accelerate the process of '... an intensification of group-centered, pluralistic politics'. See Bimber, B. (1998). 'The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism', *Polity*, 31:1, pp. 133–60.

[14] Fauna (2008a). 'Kidney Stone Gate: Fake Baby Milk Powder, Sanlu and Baidu?', <http://www.chinasmack.com/stories/kidney-stone-gate-fake-baby-milk-powder-sanlu-baidu/>, [Accessed 6 September 2011]. Fauna (2008b). 'Kidney Stone Gate: Baidu Denies Censoring Search Results', <http://www.chinasmack.com/stories/kidney-stone-gate-baidu-denies-censoring-search-results/>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

[15] He, Q. (2008). *The Fog of Censorship: Media Control in China,* Human Rights in China, Washington. Weber, I. and Lu, J. (2007). 'Internet and Self-regulation in China: The Cultural Logic of Controlled Commodification', *Media, Culture and Society*, 29:5, pp. 772–89.

[16] Zhang, Q. (2009). '"*Xin Weiquanzhuyi*" *zai Zhongguo* ("New Authoritarianism" in China)', <http://www.cp.org.cn/show.asp?NewsID=446>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

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opportunities for expanded freedoms relating to issues of social and economic justice, while keeping successful controls over 'the public sphere, including political power and public opinion'.[17] The Internet in mainland China is now subject both to the old ideological tradition of rule by party and government, with subtle but effective control modalities, as well as to the new influence of commercialization, which is a tendency towards 'refeudalization'.[18] Thus, the cyber utopia of an independent public sphere 'for citizens to engage in enlightened debate'[19] is limited and this trend cannot be controlled unless an institutional arrangement is made in the field of cyberspace.

In a historical re-evaluation of the bourgeois public sphere, Fraser[20] argues that rather than opening up the political realm to everyone, the bourgeois public sphere shifted political power from 'a repressive mode of domination to a hegemonic one' ruled by the majority ideology instead of power. To deal with this hegemonic domination, she argues that repressed groups form 'subaltern counter-publics' or 'counter-publics'—the marginalized groups' own public spheres—that are 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs'.[21] Studies have noted that the mode of mobile phone-mediated communications utilized by individuals and civil network groups could shape and facilitate grassroots democracy; bring ordinary people, opposition parties, and dissent groups into the democratic participatory processes; challenge those in political power; and cure the flaws of democratic government.[22] Yet little work has been done

[17] Lu, J. and Weber, I. (2007). 'State, Power and Mobile Communication: A Case Study of China', *New Media and Society*, 9:6, p. 927.

[18] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

[19] Hauser, G. (1998). 'Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricality of Public Opinion', *Communication Monographs*, 65, p. 83.

[20] Fraser, N. (1990). 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, Duke University Press, Duke, p. 67.

[21] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 67. Downey, J. and Fenton, N. (2003). 'New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere', *New Media and Society*, 5:2, pp. 185–202.

[22] Goldstein, J. (2007). 'The Role of Digital Networked Technologies in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution', Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2007–14, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1077686>, [Accessed 6 September 2011]. MacKinnon, R. (2005). 'Chinese Cell Phone Breaches North Korean Hermit Kingdom', YaleGlobal, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/chinese-cell-phone-breaches-north-korean-hermit-kingdom>, [Accessed 5 March 2012]. Rafael, V. (2003). 'The Cell Phone and the Crowd: Messianic Politics in the Contemporary Philippines', *Public*

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that tackles the issue of the impact or implication of mobile phone-assisted popular protests—whether it be the nationalistic protests against Japan or France or the Falun Gong meditation cult[23]—for 'the plebeian counter-public sphere'[24] mechanism in contemporary China.

As the current mobile information revolution sweeping across China has widened ordinary citizens' access to information and expression, there has been a new turn in the debates over digital media, democracy, and the public sphere. Control of mobile phones by the regime in China is still in its initial phase.[25] Acknowledging the structural conditions for control over wireless telephony is critical because it alerts us to a series of concrete scenarios in which mobile phones can be used to strengthen social control for the purpose of pre-empting risk and guarding against certain 'manipulators' to control public opinion via online communications. As one of the first of such studies, this paper regards the multi-function mobile phone to be a good model to illustrate how the new information and communication technologies and ordinary Chinese people interact. Further, it attempts to explain the specific context of the socio-techno-cultural repercussions and information ecologies of China that make it something of an outlier case against Habermas' bourgeois public sphere with regard to Asian countries.[26]

Methodology

Because of the sensitive nature of popular protests, difficulties always occur in trying to uncover what is really happening. The first problem

Culture, 15:3, pp. 399–425. Suarez, S. (2006). 'Mobile Democracy: Text Messages, Voter Turnout and the 2004 Spanish General Election', *Representation*, 42:2, pp. 117–28.

[23] Zhao, Y. (2007). 'After Mobile Phones, What? Re-embedding the Social in China's "Digital Revolution"', *International Journal of Communication,* 1:1, pp. 92–120. Qiu, L. (2006). 'The Wireless Leash: Mobile Messaging Service as a Means of Control', *International Journal of Communication*, pp. 74–91. Yeung L. K. (2008). *Digital Democracy: How the American and Hong Kong Civil Societies Use New Media to Change Politics*. CNAPS Visiting Fellow Working Paper, <http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/rc/papers/2008/04_digital_democracy_yeung/04_digital_democracy_yeung.pdf>, [Accessed 5 March 2012].

[24] Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*.

[25] Lynch, D. (2000). 'The Nature and Consequences of China's Unique Pattern of Telecommunications Development' in Lee, C. *Power, Money, and Media*, Northwestern University Press, Chicago.

[26] Calhoun, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere'. Qiu, L. and Thompson, E. (2007). 'Editorial: Mobile Communication and Asian Modernities', *New Media and Society*, 9:6, pp. 895–901.

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is a 'media censorship barrier'—the difference between what really happens and what is broadcast. In most cases, popular protest is only learned about by the public after its exposure in the traditional media. The second is a 'sensitivity barrier'—the difference between what has been found out and which information is available for academia. No country, including China, is willing to disclose to the public or academia all the information they hold on popular protests. This paper uses mixed-method research, combining descriptive and qualitative approaches with quantitative information from publications and media reports about popular protests as objects of analysis.[27]

In order to develop new tools to extract more out of the limited information available, the multiple-case study[28] is applied as one critical resource to highlight the typical issues in China's mobile phone-assisted popular protests. Data for this study draws from cases involving the spontaneous use of the mobile phone to trigger and organize protests, and the practice of information distribution within the context of the civilian spread of mass opinion. This paper is not an attempt to explain the various factors that caused the popular protest cases, but instead describes and interprets the extent to which mobile phones entered into the popular protests under conditions of control. The first case-study examines the role of mobile phones during the 2007 anti-PX demonstration—one of the biggest middle-class protests in recent years—against what people perceived as a threat to their well-being,[29] in which the government shelved plans for a chemical plant after information, ricocheted by mobile phones, indicated the possible negative effects it might have on people's health. The second case is the use of the mobile phone in intensifying the deep-seated resentment and associated devastating explosion in unexpected mass incidents in the countryside that manifested in Weng'an just weeks before China hosted the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, and which was also one of the biggest riots in China's rural areas.

[27] Main sources include reports from AP, AFP, Reuters, and Xinhua News Agency; American-based *International Herald Tribune*, *Washington Post*, and *The Economist*; China mainland-based *China Business Journal*, *China Youth Daily*, *Oriental Weekly*, and *Southern Metropolitan Daily*; Hong Kong-based *Phoenix Weekly*, *South China Morning Post*, and *Asia Weekly* (YZZK); Fujian-based *Xiamen Daily*, *Xiamen Business News*, *Xiamen Evening News*, and so on.

[28] Yin, R. (2003). *Case Study Research,* Sage Publications, London.

[29] *The Economist* (2007). 'Protest in China: Mobilised by Mobile', 23 June, 383 (8534), pp. 48–49, <http://www.economist.com/node/9367055>, [Accessed 21 April 2012].

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By considering the impact of both events, these case-studies offer a close look at popular protests and the outcome of public engagement through mobile media.

Recruiting key people (professors, journalists, university students, and local residents) as 'seeds', this study uses Respondent-Driven Sampling[30] to locate the hard-to-reach groups involved in the anti-PX demonstrations. Combining the breadth of coverage of network-based methods with the standard chain-referral sampling methods, Respondent-Driven Sampling is based on populations with a personal contact pattern with mobile phones. This method works to overcome personal bias during interviews, for instance a bias toward gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or religion, and provides certain financial incentives for interviewees to recruit each other for one-to-one interviews. The study sample comprised 87 interviewees, ranging from journalists and students to NGO leaders and local peasants. Instead of reaching only the most visible, vocal, and loudest protestors, the greatest benefit of Respondent-Driven Sampling is that it helps to encourage ordinary people to speak openly, allowing the researchers to learn about the network patterns of mobile phone-mobilized demonstration.

Based on peer recruitment, the study was initiated by inviting five to eight interviewees to help start the project. These interviewees are not necessarily famous nor high profile, but have a network of relationships in a community, since Respondent-Driven Sampling depends on a high contact pattern of the subjects studied. Each of these recruits was interviewed in person in a friendly environment. Following the interview, each of these 'seeds' was given three souvenirs with which to recruit additional interviewees. The plan was to pay the initial 'seeds' 30 Chinese yuan (4.4 US dollars) for each additional interviewee. The limit set on payment incentives was intended to avoid the overrepresentation of particular groups of interviewees and the exclusion of others. One of the most important indirect findings was the interviewees' deep desire to share their anti-PX stories without compensation.

A mixed method ethnography with semi-structured interviews was adopted, mainly for a detailed snapshot of how the samples, from

[30] Heckathorn, D. (2002). 'Respondent-Driven Sampling II: Deriving Valid Population Estimates from Chain-referral Samples of Hidden Populations', *Social Problems*, 49:1, pp. 11–34. Salganik, M. and Heckathorn, D. (2004). 'Sampling and Estimation in Hidden Populations Using Respondent-Drive Sampling', *Sociological Methodology*, 34:1, pp. 193–239.

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the middle class to students in metropolitan cities to rural residents, use wireless services to explore their identities and create new ones. The interviews took ten days and the answers were recorded. The interviewees looked back upon and discussed their concerns freely, including their feelings, attitudes, and understanding with regard to a wide variety of aspects of the mobile phone and popular protests. An open-ended interview guide helped to describe and analyse how they were involved in protests during the politically sensitive event. The subjects were asked to consider and probe their own behaviours and responses to the mobilizing calls they received and the impact of the mobile phone on themselves, their social relationships, and society during popular protests.

Mobile phones, the anti-PX stroll,[31] and policy overthrow in Xiamen

The Xiamen PX project, estimated to generate an annual revenue of 80 billion Chinese yuan (10.4 billion US dollars) by producing 800,000 tonnes of paraxylene, was sanctioned by the State Council in 2004 and underwent an environmental assessment by the State Environmental Protection Administration, which gave it the go-ahead in July 2005.[32] The campaigns against the Xiamen PX project started unexpectedly in early 2006 by home owners of The Future Coast, 'a so-called No.1 health coastal residential community in Xiamen'.[33] The letters and emails of complaint from residents about 'an awful stench from a nearby wastewater treatment plant and a sour taste from a big chemical plant'[34] to both state and local governments and environmental watchdogs received no response. Later, Professor Zhao Yufen from Xiamen University organized a petition in which six Chinese Academy of Sciences academicians (included Zhao) and 104 other Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference members

[31] Chinese people prefer 'stroll' as a euphemism for 'demonstration'. This much more sensitive and politically loaded term is used to describe their demonstrations against some unpopular events.

[32] *China Newsweek*, 'The Power of Mobile Messaging'. The remaining six PX projects are located in Nanjing, Guangdong, Dalian, Fuzhou, Huizhou, and Qingdao. The demand for chemicals such as paraxylene is soaring as China's manufacturing industries expand.

[33] China.org.cn (2008). 'People vs. Chemical Plant', <http://www.china.org.cn/english/environment/239503.htm>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

[34] China.org.cn, 'People vs. Chemical Plant'.

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enumerated the possible safety consequences and pollution risks of the 300-acre factory complex, located only seven kilometres away from the city centre, during the 'two Congresses' in March 2007. They supported calls for the project to be relocated, but accomplished nothing. The construction of the PX plant was, in fact, accelerated.[35] All these ratifications and arguments, little known to the public,[36] had not come to their attention until a popular text message was sent via mobile phone in mid-March after the 'two Congresses'. This message, which spread throughout the country, argued that the PX project would be detrimental to the environment and public health.[37] It read:

> The Xianglu Group has invested in the project in the Haicang district. When this massive toxic chemical product goes into production, that will mean an atomic bomb has been released over all Xiamen island. The people of Xiamen will live with leukemia and deformed babies. We want to live and we want to be healthy! International organizations require these types of projects to be developed at least 100 kilometers away from cities. Xiamen will be only 16 kilometers away...
>
> For the sake of future generations, pass this message on to all your Xiamen friends!

This version of the text message called upon people to pass on the information as soon as possible. These kinds of messages spread to an unprecedented degree not only to the people in Xiamen and their relatives, but also to those who had once lived or studied in Xiamen.[38] The phrase 'Did you receive the [PX-related] SMS?' also became the opening remark when Xiamen citizens met each other in the following three months.[39] There was a great unease among the citizens after this information spread. The most common question

[35] Huang, H. (2007). '*Baiming Zhengxie Weiyuan Nanzu Xiamen Baiyi Huagong Xiangmu* (More than 100 Political Consultative Conference Members Failed to Stop the Billion Chemical Factory Complex Project in Xiamen)', *The Oriental Weekly*, 26 May.

[36] During the interviews, none of the interviewees got the information about the PX plant from local media as their first source. Also see Buckley, C. (2007). 'China City Suspends Chemical Plant After Uproar', <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSPEK7567720070530>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

[37] The earliest date that anyone received the mobile message was 11 March 2007. Interview, residents in Xiamen, 2007.

[38] Interview, undergraduate and graduate students in Fuzhou, Guangzhou, and Shanghai who studied in Xiamen, 2007, 2009. Some of their schoolmates, who still used the Xiamen mobile phone number, also got those messages at that time, even though they were studying abroad.

[39] Interview, residents in Xiamen, 2007. Also see Zhu, H. (2007). '*Baiyi Huagong Xiangmu Yinfa Judu Chuanwen, Xiamen Guoduan Jiaoting Yingdui Gonggong Weiji* (Xiamen

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was: since the placement of the chemical plant in Xiamen is vitally connected to public interests, why was this never disclosed?[40] The 2006 documents from the State Council and the State Environmental Protection Administration[41] specified that public consultations must be held in cases when a project would have an impact on the public's environmental interests. Public opposition began to build through the Internet.[42] At the same time, local government started to block rather than clarify the PX-related information, using conventional censorship paradigms, including blocking access to news, shutting down the online forum and the public bulletin board system, jamming sensitive words from websites,[43] and hammering out various schemes to paint the critical PX-related reports from outsider media as 'yellow journalism' intended to spoil Xiamen's image.[44]

The press in Xiamen, on the other side, failed to inform local residents about the controversies and objections raised against the PX project until 28 May, announcing instead that it was 'a great project' approved under the current laws and regulations, in effect trying to persuade local residents to accept the chemical plant.[45] Meanwhile, the *Phoenix Weekly*, trying to bring the potentially hazardous PX project into the public arena, was quickly pulled from shelves in Xiamen by the

Calls an Abrupt Halt to the PX Project to Deal with the Public Crisis)', *Nanfang Zhoumo* (*Southern Weekend*), 28 May, p. A1.

[40] Interviews, residents in Xiamen, 2007.

[41] The documents include The State Council of the People's Republic of China (2005). '*Guowuyuan Guanyu Luoshi Kexue Fazhanguan Jiaqiang Huanjing Baohu de Jueding* (Decision on Implementing the Scientific Concept of Development and Stepping up Environmental Protection by the State Council)', 3 December, Beijing, and The Ministry of Environmental Protection of the People's Republic of China (2006). '*Huanping Gongzhong Canyu Zanxing Banfa* (The Temporary Act of Environmental Impact Assessment of Public Participating)', 2 February, Beijing.

[42] Interview, student in Xiamen University, 2007.

[43] Interview, a webmaster of Baidu Tieba, 2008.

[44] Xiamen Net (2007). '*Bie Haole Shangba Wangle Teng* (Never Ever Forget the Pain Once the Wound is Healed)', <http://www.xmnn.cn/xwzx/jrjd/200706/t20070604_223159.htm>, [Accessed 6 September 2011]. The Publicity Department of Xiamen University published 'the brief announcement of Zhao Yufen', which asserted that Professor Zhao had never been interviewed and had never authorized any media to express her opinions concerning the PX project. In contrast, Huang Han, a journalist from *Oriental Weekly*, argued that the announcement was intended to negate the interviews with Zhao Yufen by outside news media, including *Oriental Weekly*, and frame up the accusation of mendacious reports. See <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/1676634/>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

[45] *Xiamen Shangbao (Xiamen Business News)* (2007). '*Haicang PX Xiangmu yi an Guojia Fading Chengxu Pizhun zaijian* (The Haicang PX Project Have Been Approved by the National Regulations on Investment and Management)', 31 May, p. A2.

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authorities.[46] That action fanned public anger and provoked heated protest against the PX plant by residents in Xiamen.

Simultaneously, text messages and calls began ricocheting around Xiamen, urging residents to join a street protest.[47] One read:

> For the sake of our future generations, take action! Participate among 10,000 people, June 1 at 8 a.m., opposite the municipal government building! Hands tie yellow ribbons![48] Pass this message on to all your Xiamen friends!

At the same time residents continued to comment during daily conversations or through mobile exchanges, voicing their scepticism and anger. Later, they complained that the local government's postponement of the project was not the same as cancelling it, voicing their great suspicion that it was a delaying tactic that would result in people forgetting and moving on. The apex of the anti-PX movement occurred after 28 May with 'millions of Xiamen residents forwarding the same text message around mobile phones'[49], urging people to join a street protest opposing the government's chemical plant. Taking note of this, the government asked various departments to prepare to work on stabilizing the masses.[50] But on 1 June, around 10,000 people still took to the streets and staged a peaceful 'stroll' from 8 am to 5 pm, to signal their unhappiness with the government's decision, which they feared would ruin their long-term health. This 'stroll' pushed the movement to a higher level of mobilization and drew national and international publicity.[51] Slogans of 'Stop construction, postponement is not enough' became a key demand from the demonstrators.[52] By

[46] Interviews, residents in Xiamen, 2007.

[47] Some reports said this message was definitely first sent on 25 March. See *Asia Sentinel* (2007). 'SMS Texts Energize a Chinese Protest', <http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=520&Itemid=31>, [Accessed 5 March 2012].

[48] A yellow ribbon was the symbol associated with environmental protection in the anti-PX march.

[49] Lanyun, Zhang, Y. (2007). '*Xiamen Baiwan Shimin Fengchuan Tongyi Duanxin* (Millions of Xiamen Residents Forwarding the Same Text Message Around Mobile Phones)', *Nanfang Dushibao* (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*), <http://china.rednet.cn/c/2007/05/29/1214556.htm>, [Accessed 5 March 2012].

[50] For instance, local schools told students they would be expelled if they took to the streets. Interviews, student, journalist, civil servant, and local residents, Xiamen, 2007 and 2008.

[51] *China Newsweek*, 'The Power of Mobile Messaging'. *Asia Sentinel*, 'SMS Texts Energize a Chinese Protest'.

[52] Interview, civil servant who works in the Xiamen municipal government building and local residents, Xiamen, 2007 and 2008.

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10.30 am, demands against PX were competing for airtime with more sensitive political demands, particularly for the resignation of the city's party secretary.[53] As the march went on, many people, including passersby, pulled out their mobile phones and took pictures and videos. Some of them sent live updates from their mobiles phone to their friends, webpages, blogs or video sites.[54] In addition, many videos of the march were uploaded to YouTube.[55] During the demonstration, Bullog, one of the websites with live reports, saw over 40,000 hits in just four hours.

According to China.org.cn, the authorized government portal site to China, the local government 'face[d] strong political pressure after the June 1 demonstration'.[56] The turnabout had occurred. *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*), the Chinese Communist Party's official mouthpiece, ran a front-page editorial condemning local officials who had disregarded President Hu Jintao's admonitions to preserve the environment.[57] The local government announced the decision to halt construction and, six months later, relocated the plant to Gulei Peninsula, home to a strip of fishing villages far less populous and developed, in a process that included public participation in the environmental impact assessment.[58]

The anti-PX demonstration both resulted from and changed the dynamics of mobile phone communication and popular protest. It shows that a new mode of spontaneous and voluntarily self-organized political participation and mobilizing structures, enabled by low-cost mobile communication, has diffused into the norms of collective actions in contentious politics against the inertia and systematic obstructions in the entrenched bureaucracy in Chinese society.

Mobile phone and mass incident in rural China

Mobile phone-assisted popular protests have not only occurred in urban areas; they have also intensified escalating clashes, associated

[53] Interview, local residents, Xiamen, 2008.

[54] See, for example, Kennedy, J. (2007). 'China: Liveblogging from Ground Zero', <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2007/06/01/china-liveblogging-from-ground-zero/>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

[55] See, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfzMg0×3KIk>, [Accessed 5 March 2012].

[56] China.org.cn, 'People vs. Chemical Plant'.

[57] *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*) (2007). '*Dahao Jieneng Jianpai Gongjianzhan* (Work Hard to Tackle Difficult Tasks for Energy Saver and Exhaust Reducer)', 5 June, p. 1.

[58] China.org.cn, 'People vs. Chemical Plant'.

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rumours, and unexpected mass incidents in the countryside. On 28 June 2008, thousands of mobile phone-mobilized local residents assaulted and torched a police station and smashed county government office buildings in southwest China's Guizhou Province, in unrest triggered by the allegation of a cover-up of a 16-year-old girl's 'unusual death'.[59]

Weng'an, a remote county in Guizhou Province, is poor. Per capita income among farmers—who account for 90 per cent of the county's 460,000 people—is just 2,000 Chinese yuan (292.6 US dollars) a year.[60] The chaos started in Weng'an County on the afternoon of 28 June when people, dissatisfied with the medical and legal expertise brought to bear on the death of a local female student, gathered at the county government and public security bureau. Li Shufen was found dead in a river on 22 June after being spotted going out with her classmate Wang Jiao and two other adolescents. Later that day the police retrieved Li's body and detained these three suspects. After a postmortem examination, the local government declared that Li had committed suicide by leaping into the river. However, the girl's relatives refused to accept the results and claimed that she had been killed. After the police released the three suspects unconditionally the next day, without any interrogation or taking statements, there were lots of versions, variations, and recombinations of how Li's death had occurred. Some said that Wang Jiao and the two young men who, it was claimed, had familial ties with the local public security bureau, raped and killed Li and then tossed her body into the river afterwards. An alternative rumour was that these three students had taken revenge because Li had refused to pass tips to them during an examination. Li's family therefore presented a petition to the county party committee office, seeking a thorough re-examination of Li Shufen's body. When this was refused, tension began to mount. The rumour spread that

[59] Yardley, J. (2008). 'Chinese Riot Over Handling of Girl's Killing', *The New York Times*, 30 June, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/30/world/asia/30iht-30riot.14086300.html?_r=1>, [Accessed 5 March 2012]. Buckley, C. (2008). 'Girl's Death Sparks Rioting in China', Reuters, 28 June, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUKPEK27256220080628?sp=true>, [Accessed 6 September 2011]. Mu, X. (2008). 'Police Station Assaulted, Torched by Local People in Southwest China County', Xinhua, 29 June, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008–06/29/content_8456602.htm>, [Accessed 6 September 2011]. Ding, B. (2008). '*Weng'an, buan de Xiancheng* (Weng'an, An Unpeaceful County City)', *Nanfang Zhoumo* (*Southern Weekend)*, 10 July, p. A1.

[60] Luo, C. (2008). '*Weng'an "6.28" Shijian Liubian* (Evolvement of "June 28" Incident in Weng'an)', *Caijing*, 7 July, pp. 40–43.

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the relatives had been assaulted by the policemen instead of getting justice.[61] Some text messages read:

> Without conducting a full autopsy, the police believed the girl committed suicide by jumping in a river, and they did not take mandatory measures against the suspect and ignored the family's call for a full autopsy.[62]

This message drew the anger of the public and later sparked the conflicts that occurred. Li Shufen's death became intertwined with corrupt government officials, merciless policemen, and perceived injustice across the small county. The rumours about the injustices became bigger and bigger, but these were clearly ignored by the government. At around 3 pm on 28 June, according to *Southern Weekend*,[63] two middle school students raised a banner saying 'Justice for the People' and several dozen followers marched behind them on behalf of Li Shufen. None of these marchers was a relative of the girl. Mobile phone messages mobilized almost 10,000 people who went to the public security bureau building where they smashed and burned all the police vehicles parked there.[64] *Ming Pao* reported that it seemed 'the entire population of the county is outside the public security bureau office building'.[65]

Different from the Xiamen demonstration, the riot in Weng'an can be seen as a turning point in the model of collective opposition, exposing not only a flare-up of intolerable contradictions between some local governments and residents during the process of the structural transformation of Chinese society, but also the low public credibility of official organizations and the mass media. Mobile networks linking people together became a direct weapon of resistance to the local government.

[61] The Hong Kong media later interviewed the uncle of the deceased girl. His comments on camera and the follow-up mainland media reports showed, first, that he had not been beaten to death as had been reported. Secondly, he had been beaten by unidentified persons. See *Guizhou Ribao* (*Guizhou Daily)* (2008). '*Wo hai mei si* (I Am Not Dead Yet)', 2 July. Later it was also proven that the three accused were farmers' children and were therefore not protected by favouritism.

[62] Buckley, 'Girl's Death Sparks Rioting in China'.

[63] *Southern Weekend,* 'Weng'an, An Unpeaceful County City', p. A1.

[64] Yu, J. (2008). '*Shehui Xiefen Shijian Fansi* (A Review of Social Incident Just From Spite)', *Nanfengchuang* (*South Wind View)*, 19 July, pp. 20–21.

[65] *Ming Pao* (2008). 'Thousands of Residents Torched the Police Station in Guizhou', <http://www.duping.net/XHC/show.php?bbs=10&post=860562>, [Accessed 5 March 2012].

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Findings and discussion

Whether movements similar to those that took place in Xiamen or Weng'an subside or flare up again remains to be seen, but these mobile phone-assisted popular protests themselves are of enormous significance for all those fighting against environmental destruction or for social justice, as well as for democratic rights and political participation in China. These protests from the urban middle class and the rural peasants at the bottom of Chinese society marked not only the emergence of ground-breaking protest movements, but also a significant increase in public recognition of the mobile phone as a legitimate news source and weapon with a powerful capacity to mobilize. They have had a far-reaching impact on Chinese politics and society and they are still being quoted, learned from, talked about, and felt by people as rare victories of public opinion over local bureaucrats for whom economic development is normally the top priority (Xiamen), or as a counterattack to official malfeasance, practices of favouritism, and inaction (Weng'an). Grassroots mobile phone mobilization in particular brings more chances for the interests of peasants to take precedence over those of central government. Transforming digital activism which reduces biases in an uneven political playing field, enables political insurgents, who are normally disadvantaged in their access to resources and the main media, to be in a position to compete more effectively. More importantly, these events, which rely on public participation, established a new type of activism that focused on a single issue in order to change government habits and mass media practice. The power of the mobile phone in these cases of popular dissent performs the following four tasks.

First, wireless communication technology is poised to breach the state-mandated information blockade, reshaping people's views and knowledge against the silence of local government and media. The capacity for citizens 'to communicate with each other' and 'to gain access to [the] information they need', as Calhoun points out, '... are crucial to enabling citizens to make democratic choices'.[66] In the Xiamen protest, the PX issue was picked up by alarmed Xiamen mobile phone users before it exploded into the 'real' public (that is, the central government or mass media) view. In Xiamen, a city of 1.5 million people, the warning text message was repeated more than one

[66] Calhoun, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere'.

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million times until it had reached practically every citizen there.[67] Within hours, the message made its way onto the Internet, while millions of text messages were circulated even more widely and quickly via mobile phones as part of the mass campaign against the plant.[68] Mobile phones made sure that even citizens without access to the Internet could be warned about the negative effects of the PX plant. During the demonstration, when most of the police and soldiers were just surrounding people, rather than blocking the demonstrators, thus giving them a kind of indirect support, some of the police were even telling people to make a racket if they wanted to, and it worked.[69] As one stressed, 'Every person already knew very well via mobile message alerts that they, and their children, would suffer if the PX project goes ahead.'[70]

Due to a lack of access and intensive control mechanisms, the Internet cannot be considered as a solution for rural inhabitants in the poverty-stricken countryside such as the town of Weng'an. In remote rural areas, mobile phones serve as a gateway to accept and transmit data between ordinary people against the untrustworthy government and silent local media. It shows that the right to the free flow of information—to access the significant information people need—is as important as the right to express public opinion. Moreover, public opinion articulated in mobile phone-mediated popular protests is not merely a virtual venting but a profoundly positive involvement in public affairs. Communication via mobile media has the potential to lead to a more open and free public domain that is less constrained by officially sanctioned agendas, editorial policies in traditional media, or censorship and subtle but effective controls of the Internet.

Second, the capacity for organization via mobile phones is key to the success of protest movements, since it circumvents the possibility of stopping the proliferation of mobilized information. We can also see from these cases that besides the possibility of the free flow of information and points of view, mobile phones function in a sense like neighbourhood salons that help to aggregate individual

[67] *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, 'Millions of Xiamen Residents Forwarding the Same Text Message Around Mobile Phones'.

[68] Xinhua (2007). '*Xiamen shizhengfu Xuanbu Huanjian 108 yiyuan Waizi px Huagong Xiangmu* (Xiamen's government announce the postponement of 1.08-billion-foreign-investment PX project)': <http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/70110/70114/5800578.html>, [Accessed 6 September 2011].

[69] Interview, local residents, Xiamen, 2008.

[70] Interview, local residents, Xiamen, 2007, 2008.

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preferences into a collective choice. These case-studies demonstrate that protesters are finding a quick organizational way around controls from the Internet police and spy software, or any other obstacle, despite warnings from local government and the public security bureau. Acting as an extension of individual communication, public participation in the decision-making process that is facilitated via mobile phones has, on the one hand, effectively widened the channels for persuading the government, whether local or central, to gather public opinion when initiating public policies. On the other hand, it has encouraged and protected those people in their struggle for their legitimate rights.

Third, the high-speed decentralization of information dissemination via mobile phones protects the organizers from being detained or jailed. In mobile phone-mediated popular protests, every person has the opportunity to become an organizer when they forward information to other people. As a result, it has become difficult to capture the key person in a demonstration. In Xiamen's anti-PX demonstration, each interviewee admitted that they had received one or more messages calling for a 'stroll' against the government's decision. Many of the text messages came from an anonymous mobile phone number. At this stage, the Chinese government and their citizens had been deluged with text protests demanding the relocation of the project and showing support for the Xiamen struggle. The efficiency of the information dissemination within the decentralized architecture of mobile phones also helps to protect the organizers of popular protests from being co-opted, bought off, detained or jailed by the government.[71] In other words, each person who forwards the mobilizing information acts to support the organization of the demonstration, which cannot be controlled or traced back to the source of the information.

Fourth, calls, photos, and audio and video material from multi-function mobile phones broadcast information about the demonstrations to the world, bringing inevitable and irresistible attention from the central government and overseas media, which in turn gives power to citizens that they had not even envisioned. The interactions between ordinary people appear at first glance only to affirm seemingly positive and effective public communication.

[71] Li, L. and O'Brien, K. (2008). 'Protest Leadership in Rural China', *China Quarterly*, 193, pp. 1–23. Cai, Y. (2008). 'Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China', *China Quarterly*, 193, pp. 24–42.

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However, discourses, debates, and demonstrations of public opinion on mobile phones and in cyberspace have been shown to have a far-reaching impact on the government in connection with its roles, institutions, and bureaucracies in the information age. What should not be underestimated in particular is mobile phone-enabled real-time reporting. With the easy availability of mobile phones—including mobile phone cameras—in rural and urban areas, people no longer have to depend on cumbersome and suspicious-looking video cameras and computers to capture their struggles to send to their friends. In the case-studies that have been discussed, live reporting by ordinary citizens with long-lead, on-the-spot reports gave quick responses to the events, and actively engaged them in spreading politically sensitive news, expressing different opinions about the event—even criticism of the government—and forced the authorities to tweak its ham-fisted responses to challenges from below and its propaganda war. As a result, sources from the government and journalism are becoming a smaller part of people's information mix. The mass media is no longer the sole gatekeeper to what the public knows. In part, that power is moving away from those who cover the news to those who make it. And even with a media blackout on news of the demonstrations, the time, location, and target turnout of millions of people were spread almost exclusively by calls, text messages, bulletin board postings, and on blogs, making these internationally observed mass demonstrations. Pressure bore down on the local government when live photos and real-time videos were uploaded onto the Internet or circulated among mobile users, travelling to larger audiences or groups. Considering that there had already been 'citizen' journalism enabled by mobile phones, and that the press from overseas media, such as AP, Reuters, and the *Financial Times*, had already taken note of the issues, any crackdown to prevent the protests would probably have made the situation worse, or perhaps even sparked a violent conflict. The longer such protests continue, the more politicized they become. In this sense, the government must gradually begin to take public opinion into consideration when initiating and implementing public policies. The government and journalists who work within the control mechanisms of the government, as a result, need to learn quickly how to help shape the new regulatory direction, how to help educate government officials about which rules will work and which will not, based upon the new era of information distribution.

Beyond the question of individual identity formation, free flow of information, and organizational capability, the mobile phone as a

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medium in popular protests affords a useful model to understand how the new digital information and communication technologies are driving the next social revolution, transforming the ways in which Chinese mobile citizens meet, work, study, organize, and protest in China. With a participatory ethos, mobile phones in both rural and urban popular protests struggle to enable the free flow of information and expression (Xiamen), social justice, and the rule of law (Weng'an), seeking to build an inexpensive counter-public sphere which invents and circulates discourses opposed to those featured in the mainstream, making the predominant public sphere more inclusive and open to ordinary people. The practice of the mobile-phone enabled counter-public sphere therefore centres on both the idea of participatory democracy and how public opinion becomes political action. This also means that the central government will have to take the public's opinions—mediated by mobile phones—seriously.

Conclusion

Based on the cases of popular protest assisted by the mobile phone in rural and urban areas—and in a country with the world's largest and fastest-growing population of mobile phone users—this paper highlights a growing problem for the Chinese government.

The development of China's 'multi-centric' telecommunications network, according to Lynch,[72] is shattering a decades-old (even centuries-old) pattern of local isolation and is establishing conditions for the development of a cross-hatching 'social *xitong* (system)' which links individuals, organizations, and groups throughout the country with each other and with people abroad. Spread via mobile phone, with a personal approach that incorporates proximity and therefore higher credibility, directives and rumours from mobile media, even messages without clear organizational identity, helped to draw thousands of people together for a public demonstration or mass riot, creating a cascading effect that inflamed public passions and made waves in Chinese society. These events, by no means isolated, mean that participation is not generated by institutions but is based on personal motivation and articulated via mobile phones. At the same time, telecommunications fall outside of the mass media-centred model.

[72] Lynch, 'The Nature and Consequences of China's Unique Pattern of Telecommunications Development', p. 182.

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With low-cost mobile phones gaining popularity, there are now new, competing models of citizen journalism, with more outlets delivering news. The paradox of professionalizing the new medium in order to preserve its integrity as an independent citizen platform is the start of a complex new era in the evolution of the mobile phone-mediated public sphere.

People want technology that is easy to use and serves a definite purpose. With farmers accounting for nearly 57 per cent of the population in China, the issue of the 'digital divide' has become—first and foremost—an obstacle to the goal of participatory communications and the public sphere. Many critics argue that development agencies have focused too much on the information aspect of technology rather than the communication aspect. That is not to say technology isn't the answer. Technology may be part of the answer—but not a very big part—just as the technical features of mobile phones do not automatically promote democracy and public service. Other factors, such as education and an understanding that the new technology will promote democracy, play a big role. As communication technology—led primarily by the spread of the mobile phone—seeps deeper into Chinese society, an information technology sphere is starting to emerge. Details vary from incident to incident, but they share a common foundation of mobile media as part of non-mainstream, grassroots efforts to serve the social, cultural, and political needs of small communities, including the well-educated middle class and illiterate or semi-literate peasants who have been excluded from or marginalized in the mass-media public sphere.

With the critiques of the concept of the public sphere oriented toward a model of multiplicity, the term 'counter-public sphere' is more appropriately used for the mobile phone-mediated sphere, for it signals not only its existence alongside the dominant public sphere but also its resistance in the face of being excluded from it. Mobile phone counter-public spheres in Chinese society counteract this exclusion not only by trying to (re)inject new topics of democratic expression into the agenda but by challenging the values of public participation that underlie the discussions of topics already on the agenda and the norms on which cyber exclusion is based. In the case of China, mobile phone-assisted popular protests shed light on and motivate further enquiry into whether the mobile phone-mediated counter-public sphere could possibly influence the trajectory of China's future political socioeconomic development. Using mobile media as an information source will increase the magnitude of

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social participation in local issues by groups with varying levels of education. In other words, mobile media will serve as an integrating force, influencing attitudes towards increased public involvement and linking new generations to the large social system and outside world. Over the past six years, the decentralization of media control (brought on by the growing power and use of mobile media) and the virus-like communication effects of the mobile phone have broadened the vision of both the social elites and ordinary people. A unique democratic paradigm is increasingly characterized by the widespread application of advanced information and communication technologies in present-day democratic theory and practice. 'Strong democracy', a new form of participatory politics for a new age, as Barber[73] proposes, requires unmediated self-government by an engaged citizenry and institutions that involve individuals at both the neighbourhood and the national level in common decision-making and political judgement, in common talk, and common action. As we see in these cases, the idea of the mobile phone-mediated popular protests as a specific kind of counter-public sphere can enhance, following Barber, 'direct' public participation and citizen-powered decision-making processes.[74] Mobile democratic practice involves mobile phone users participating in rational and critical deliberation and consultation, hence uniting the people to form the resultant force, which becomes no longer a mere individual or virtual expression online. This in turn revives heated discussions about the 'counter-public sphere' in reality. In this regard, the democratic potential of mobile phones could foster democratic revival as they become a more open and deliberative platform, particularly for peripheral groups, to engage in public discourse beyond that of the traditional media like newspapers and television, as well as the Internet.

This paper focuses on the power of communication technology as an independent citizens' platform to transmit messages, and the possibility for China's subaltern social classes to not just alter identities, but also to endow the individual with more responsibility and command over how he or she consumes information, plans actions, or engages in the government's public service. Under the cardinal guidelines of Chinese political correctness, the public—in particular, the inhabitants of rural areas—are often perceived

[73] Barber, B. (1984). *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, University of California Press, Berkley, p. 261.
[74] Barber, *Strong Democracy*, p. 583.

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as being unlikely to form any independent opinions of political expression, and thus unlikely to make any significant impact upon public policies. Thanks to the introduction of the mobile phone, and consequent rising public opinion and mobile phone-assisted popular protests, things have already been changing. The role of the mobile phone in fostering social interconnectivity and making citizens into independent decision-makers in the construction of Chinese political subjectivity therefore can be viewed structurally as the diminution of the effects of the established vertical model[75] of ideological communication and political control through the introduction of more interpersonal, horizontal possibilities. The political significance of the mobile phone represents a more serious and effective form of struggle. It therefore should not be underestimated in the context of contemporary China's political environment when various social forces are communicating their struggles with the aid of this technology, posing challenges in governance, and forcing the authorities to engage with new kinds of practices. As the power of mobilization, democratic expression, and political participation spreads through multi-function mobile media and networks that can never be entirely 'blocked', the government will have to figure out how to improve the effective and regular information exchange and feedback from the top down as well as the bottom up to raise awareness and understanding among higher decision-making agencies, the government, and the public. Equally important, the Chinese people need to think about what kind of useful role they can play with the help of mobile media.

[75] Bimber, 'The Internet and Political Transformation', pp. 133–60.

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