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MOBILIZED BY MOBILE MEDIA

*HOW CHINESE PEOPLE USE MOBILE PHONES TO CHANGE
POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY*

Jun Liu

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1. INTRODUCTION

THE EMERGENCE OF MOBILE COMMUNICATION IN CHINESE¹ POLITICS

1.1 THE DEFIANT DEMONSTRATION: Mobile-phone-facilitated, anti-chemical-plant protests in Xiamen

Located on the southeastern coast of China, Xiamen is an international tourist destination well known for its attractive seascapes and wide-ranging cultural events, such as the Xiamen International Marathon, one of the two leading marathon competitions in China, which attracts over 20,000 participants from across the world each year. On the serene mornings of June 1 and 2, 2007, over 20,000 people in Xiamen took to the streets and joined a procession from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.. It was not a special cultural activity; instead, people organized this peaceful public “stroll”² (*sanbu*) to signal their discontent and to protest against local government’s decision to set up a petrochemical factory, which was widely believed to be detrimental to the environment. What was eye-catching in this “one of the biggest middle-class protests” (*The Economist*, 2007) aiming at the officialdom is that mobile communication, largely mobile-phone text messaging, had played a key role for the first time in generating speculations over the previous three months all over Xiamen about various

¹ The term “China” in this dissertation refers to “mainland China” unless otherwise specified. Throughout this dissertation, I use *pinyin*, China’s official phonetic system, to romanize Chinese names, save in a few instances (such as Chin-Chuan Lee) where the older Wade-Giles system is better known. Chinese names appear with the family name preceding the given name, except for a few Chinese authors who use the Western style of putting the family name last.

² Chinese people prefer “stroll,” a euphemism for “demonstration,” a much more sensitive politically-loaded term, to describe their demonstrations against some unpopular events.

environmental issues related to the paraxylene (PX) project. Text messages triggered an explosion of public anger toward a local government that prioritized economic benefits over environmental protection, helped organize residents to gather at a specific time and place to march peacefully, and resulted in the termination of the construction in the end.

Having graduated from Xiamen University less than one year before these events, I still kept in close touch with my friends there at that time. My mobile phone inevitably buzzed with massive Short Message Service (SMS) warnings about “the atomic-bomb-like massive toxic chemical plant on Xiamen Island”¹ when public concerns swelled in a massive mobile phone message campaign as early as mid-March. In particular, when several friends and I got the SMS calling for “the participation of 10,000 people, on June 1 at 8 a.m., in front of the municipal government building”² on the evening of May 31, we were still surmising whether or not there would be this demonstration in that place on the next day. This was because, on the one hand, the residents of Xiamen, particularly the middle-class ones, are famed for their smooth temper³; on the other hand, the local government had already ordered various departments to appease the masses and had tried to do everything within its power to make sure there wouldn’t be any demonstration⁴. In a move that caught almost everyone by surprise, a largely calm and restrained “stroll” took place on June 1.

After receiving an SMS about the dramatic defiant demonstration, I sent a text message to my fellow alumni in the Xiamen press for verification; meanwhile, I also

¹ Content of SMS, March 28, 2007.

² Content of SMS, May 31, 2007.

³ That is why some reviews see the anti-PX demonstration as a middle-class dissent. See Xiao (2007).

⁴ For instance, students at schools and universities were confined to their dormitories. Local governmental departments also warned members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) that they would be expelled from the party if they participated in the event. Interviews with local residents, Xiamen, June 2007, December 2009, and September 2010.

searched online for the latest information about the march. I had confirmed very soon the truthfulness of the peaceful stroll from both my alumni and, in particular, the live reporting on blogs and videos from “citizen journalists” such as “Zola,”¹ Miao Benzhou, Aaron Roy, and Shgbird, who followed the stroll closely and sent real-time reports in texts or photos to Twitter and Flickr², and later camera-phone–recorded videos to YouTube (Bspx2007, 2007; Zola, 2007) when local media refused to report on the situation. The most informative reporting was from the SMS blogging from “Cloudswander” (*yunzhong manbu*), detailing the demonstration from 8:52:31 to 16:26:50 on the first day and 8:31:43 to 15:47 on the second day. Some important moments in the march can be read as follows³:

[8:52:31] Thirty-seven [cyber nickname]: Around 500 armed policemen are circling around. Some old ladies are shouting: “Reject pollution, protect Xiamen!” A large number of people gathered in front of the Xiamen municipal government buildings and want in. A large red banner is pulled out.

North Wind [cyber nickname]: Someone at the municipal government gate is holding up a banner which reads: “Resist PX, Protect the Egret Island⁴.” Policemen are trying to grab it away from him.

A second banner reads: “Resist the PX project, protect the citizens’ health, and protect Xiamen’s environment.”

¹ The nickname of Zhou Shuguang, a well-known Chinese blogger and citizen journalist who travels around China to document injustice done to citizens, see Zhou (2002).

² See “the Xiamen environmental protection activity on June 1” (Miao, 2007; Cloudswander, 2007; Aaronroy, 2007).

³ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. For more details about the live broadcast of the demonstration, see <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2007/06/01/china-liveblogging-from-ground-zero/>, accessed August 2, 2012.

⁴ Xiamen, also called “Egret Island,” is a habitat of white egrets.

...[9:12:16] There are already at least over 10,000 people here. The march is on!

People keep joining in along the way, and the procession keeps getting longer. More and more people can be seen wearing yellow ribbons¹.

[10:01:18]...The locals are buying bottled water and placing it on the side of the streets, handing it out to the marchers. A very moving spectacle.

...[10:25:55] There are now over 20,000 people in the march now...

...[10:37:40] People are shouting loudly for [Mayor] He Lifeng to resign. Many people, especially lots of white-collar workers are participating. Many people are jumping off buses and taxis to join in the procession.

...[11:33:59] A second armed police blockade has been broken through.

...[15:13:55] When the procession passed the Naval Hospital, people automatically stopped shouting slogans to avoid disturbing the patients. It seems sensible.

[The second day, 14:28] One girl is shouting at the government officials: “No postponing the project. Stop the construction permanently!” It is believed that the officials are all inside, but none of them comes out to discuss with the protesters. The locals are shouting but have not seen any response.

The crowd starts singing the national anthem loudly, and people keep phoning their families and friends, telling them to come.

Some people in the crowd are smashing bottles, but only a few individuals, who were immediately stopped.

(Andy1860, 2007)

¹ A yellow ribbon is a symbol associated with environmental protection in the anti-PX march.

As covered by most media (Cody, 2007; Landsberg, 2007; Zhu, 2007; China.org.cn, 2008), at first glance, the unprecedented anti-PX stroll embodies “the power of SMS” (China Newsweek, 2007) during a process of remaking a public agenda by popular protests. But in my view, it is not SMS itself that counts, but rather the social uses of the technology for the empowerment of local residents. The “Imagined Communities” (Anderson, 2006) that were built up by high-speed and hard-to-control decentralization of SMS dissemination, widespread circulation of environmental-sensitive information, growing frustration and discontent toward the local government, and real-time, on-the-spot reporting from camera phones, facilitated a far-reaching protest against the local government’s authoritative manner on the chemical project. The terminated PX plant later became a symbol of a rare victory of broad public opinion through the deployment of mobile technologies against the authorities. In particular, low-cost mobile devices allowed public discontent to aggregate and bubble to the surface, and a voluntary and proactive opposition to emerge, self-organize, and develop into popular protests against what people perceived as a threat to their wellbeing as well as the inertia and the systematic obstructions of the entrenched bureaucracy. As such, the Xiamen event illustrates a brand-new model of collective opposition, boosting ordinary Chinese people’s bottom-up civic engagement and political participation through new uses of a familiar technology—the mobile phone.

1.2 THE PRECARIOUS MOBILE PHONE: The nine-year evolution

The first time mobile phones attracted both the government’s and the public’s attention in China because of its role beyond mundane daily communication was no

doubt the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic¹ (Ma, 2005; Kleinman & Watson, 2006). The Chinese authorities initially pinpointed and censored all information put out on the growing number of SARS cases. Information did, however, leak out and reach the public through SMS that were passed on from person to person. For instance, one text message alone that wrote “[China’s] Ministry of Health informed that the number of SARS cases has broken through 10,000” was resent over 2.13 million times in several cities, including Chongqing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Shenyang, Chengdu, Beijing, Wuhan, Fuzhou, and Shanghai (*Jinling Evening News*, 2003). Another example is the message of “fatal viruses appear in Guangzhou,” which was transmitted 40 million times during the day of February 8, with another 41 million on the second day and another 45 million on the third day (Chen & Jiang, 2003). Panicky buying of vinegar, masks, and Chinese herbal medicines rocketed as rumors of this “fatal flu in Guangdong” reached 120 million locals through SMS and an untold additional number through email and internet chat rooms despite the government’s denial of and covering-up the severity of the disease, and against the mass media’s censorship of the relevant information (Journalism and Media Studies Centre, 2006: 19-21). The government blamed both poor management of the epidemic and senior officials, including Zhang Wenkang, then the health minister of China, and Meng Xuenong, then the mayor of Beijing, who were forced to resign for their failure to control the SARS epidemic, concealing the truth, and mishandling the matter. SARS-inflicted China for the first time demonstrated that the challenges from mobile phone use by the public could lead to deep economic, social, and political fallouts.

¹ In fact, as early as 1999, the Falun Gong religious movement has already used mobile phone to secretly organize a sit-in that surrounded the party and government leadership compound in Beijing (Shirk, 2011: 6). Nevertheless, most people did not know that due to the heavy censorship.

If the 2003 SARS communication reflects a constant tension in China between a population hungry for uncensored information and freer communication during an urgent crisis on the one hand and a government that regards information censorship and communication control as essential to its power on the other, then mobile technology makes it possible for people to express their political opinions on a much wider scale than before. In particular, ubiquitous mobile communication exerts a growing influence on people's social and political lives, with the increasing use of the mobile phone as a tool for gathering citizen input during the public-opinion-making process. For instance, Chinese youth sent text messages and chain emails in 2005 to exhort citizens to boycott Japanese merchandise and then took to the streets, giving logistical information on protest routes and even what slogans to chant in over ten cities¹. In terms of local environmental activism, the middle class in Xiamen and Dalian shared information with the help of mobile communication about the alleged misdeeds of party officials and took various civic actions against them in 2007 and 2011, respectively (Zhu, 2007; YouTube, 2011; Yu, 2011). Forwarding and relaying calls and text messages on long-standing complaints about the increased operating costs and traffic fines from taxi companies as well as government fees, thousands of taxi drivers went on a strike in Chongqing, quickly followed in Wuhan, Hainan, Gansu, Guangdong, and other provinces in 2008 and 2009 (Yang, 2008; Elegant, 2008; China in Pictures, 2009). The latest telephonic innovations for facsimile, email, and SMS enabled the dissenters and protestors to stay ahead of the government. The uses of SMS, internet, and twitter are particularly apparent in the riots that began on July 5, 2009, in the city of Urumqi by the World Uyghur Congress and its leader,

¹ The text message reads: "If Chinese people didn't buy Japanese goods for one day, 1,000 Japanese companies would go bankrupt. If they didn't buy Japanese goods for six months, half the Japanese people would lose their jobs; if they didn't buy Japanese goods for a year, the Japanese economy would collapse. Send this on to other Chinese people and we won't need a war!" (Chan, 2005).

Rebiya Kadeer, a dissident based in Washington, D. C.; these riots left at least 192 dead in one of the most violent demonstrations in decades on Chinese soil, as well as in time-critical, pro-democracy activities by dissidents, creating the potential for a mass movement that could challenge governmental controls (Pu, 2006; The Laogai Research Foundation, 2009; Perry & Selden, 2010: 2).

Encompassing many characteristics of emerging digital communication technologies such as Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS), mobile broadband network, and microblogging (e.g. *Weibo*, the Chinese twitter), the mobile phone has emerged to challenge the rigorous censorship through which the government maintains its power over China's 1.3 billion people. Citizens with special intentions may think hard about how they too can make use of the mobile phone. Even though the impact cannot be quantified easily with the available evidence, spontaneous mobilizations through participants twiddling the mobile key boards with their thumbs have become a common practice in demonstrations and "mass incidents" (*quntixing shijian*), the Chinese state's euphemism for strikes, street protests, and other forms of mass protests, particularly, involving violent conflicts. At the same time, the real-time content surveillance system for SMS, which is operated by the telecommunication companies in accordance with the government's requirements, always finds it hard to effectively monitor and filter "politically sensitive" words and phrases because people are able to come up with creative ways to bypass this notorious "Great Firewall" (He, 2008). The complexity of the current media environment is also increased by the fact that communication is a dialogue between all the participants with independent judgments involved instead of a one-way process from the authorities to the public as in the past. It remains unclear of course whether tactical advantages of mobile-phone-facilitated movements will ultimately change the current authoritarian regime,

ameliorate people's capacities for fighting for justice and challenging authorities, and enhance political participation of the citizenry. Whatever happens ultimately, mobile phone campaigns have already generated a widespread impact on Chinese society, and participants and outside observers alike have hailed it as a powerful contesting weapon.

1.3 FROM TECHNOLOGICAL TO SOCIAL TRANSITIONS IN CHINA?

The above-mentioned cases, although far from exhaustive, suggest the need for an interpretive, explanatory, and theoretical framework that captures those critical reorientations which are a key part of an emerging *mobile communication evolution* affecting China's contentious politics. Nurtured and facilitated by mobile technology, the "evolution" here refers to brand-new mobile innovations and empowerments in the Chinese context, including the important topic of "digital democracy" (Yeung, 2008)—adopting digital media tools that are accessible, affordable, interactive, and social-network-based to empower individuals to participate in politics, enrich grassroots democracy, and weaken authoritarian state controls. Mobile-mediated politics is taking shape in various international contexts, as digital democracy is gradually developed into real politics through the strategic deployment of mobile media by politicians, non-government organizations, and activists (e.g., Dányi & Sükösd, 2002; Nyíri, 2003: 259-355; Rafael, 2003; Dányi & Galács, 2005; Yeung, 2008). How is the situation in China? China is technologically ready since the diffusion of mobile phones is an organic part of China's national development strategy for a high-tech, information-based society since the beginning of 1980s

(Qian, 2009). Mainland China now has one of the largest and most populous information-technology infrastructures in the world in terms of network scale and customer base, covering most of the counties (cities) with seamless coverage on the backbone lines and indoor coverage in both urban and rural areas (China Mobile, 2007). At the end of February, 2012, the number of mobile subscribers topped 1 billion in China, an average of around four out of every five people (Xinhua, 2012). This number also means that the number of mobile subscribers in China makes up over 20% of all subscribers in the world, almost three times more than in North America and surpassing the total number of European mobile phone users (CCTV.com, 2009). China has even more impressive SMS volumes: over 1.8 billion on a daily average via China Mobile¹'s network, and 9 to 10 billion per day during holidays (Wang, 2009). On average, a Chinese citizen uses a mobile phone for more than seven hours per month, ranking as the world's fourth-largest consumer (cnBeta, 2009).

A good way to suggest the meanings and values behind the above numbers is to take living examples from Chinese people's day-to-day life. Whole city blocks full of telecom stores have spread in Chinese cities as diverse as Harbin in the north and Haikou in the south. Urban metro stations, bus stops, and walls have all become display sites for ubiquitous telecommunication advertising. Governmental agencies, radio and TV shows, internet portals, and advertising companies all vie for attention on and through people's mobile devices. For the younger generations, mobile handsets represent fashion items and the symbol of "thumb lifestyle" (*muzhi*

¹ China Mobile, a publicly-listed, state-owned enterprise in China, provides mobile voice and multimedia services through its nationwide mobile telecommunications network, the largest of its kind in the world. The other two are China Unicom and China Telecom. See the official sites: China Mobile, <http://www.chinamobile.com/en/mainland/about/profile.html>; China Unicom, <http://eng.chinaunicom.com/>; and China Telecom, <http://www.chinatelecom-h.com/eng/global/home.htm>.

shenghuo), keying in text messages and emails and accessing the internet at any moment¹. For rural-to-urban migrants, wireless connections are important hinges in finding job information, flirting with their lovers, or maintaining close-knit family ties with relatives in the far-flung countryside (Law & Peng, 2006; Law & Chu, 2008; Lin & Tong, 2008; Wallis, 2008). For business people and civil servants, mobile phone communication carries vital up-to-date information and innovations of mobile government (Song, 2005: 476-485). For those who do not have the money to promote their services by such legitimate means, spray-painting one's mobile number on walls or sidewalks has become a new kind of guerrilla advertising. Telecommunications are already part of the Chinese way of life as mobile phones seamlessly insinuate themselves into the everyday life of the people. As the population readily accepts new telecommunication technology and has affordable access to the mobile internet, people begin to rely more and more on the mobile phone for information, interpretation, and solidarity.

Despite the technological readiness, many aspects of “mobile/cell democracy” (Rafael, 2003; Suárez, 2006; Goldstein, 2007) that already are imperative in western political life do not exist yet in China, and by and large, Chinese people are still very unclear about the potential of mobile communication in the country, state-society relations, and individual life. In other words, despite constituting potentially the largest communication system in the world, China's expanding telecommunications system remains little understood as a potential model of digital democracy. Particularly, within current studies on mobile phones and civic engagement in contemporary China, little is known about the *communicative processes* of mobile users via their mobile devices or the political implications of mobile phone use for

¹ For instance, M-Zone from China Mobile, see <http://mzone.139.com/>.

China, even though both the government and the citizens seem to have promptly recognized and explored the potentials of mobile power.

One reason for this would be that SMS is the most popular service among Chinese mobile users. Consequently, although most studies have rightly emphasized how people appropriate text messaging for anxiety reduction regarding many social issues, social buildup and citizenship, and popular discourse on political sarcasm (e.g., Yu, 2004; Latham, 2007; Ma, 2008; He, 2008), they have been too narrow in emphasizing how SMS changes the information environment in present-day China, because SMS is just one part of mobile services. In addition, most studies base their arguments on content analyses of text messages, instead of exploring people's understandings in their cultural and daily context. According to He, these studies "do not take account of the context within which the SMS phenomenon has emerged" (He, 2008: 183).

In practice, still, the use of mobile phone power gradually emerges from the mobilization of popular protests against the government in a bottom-up, grassroots-based, and often spontaneous fashion, from mobile phone rumors to vent people's anger and aggravate deep-seated resentment into mass incidents, and from mobile phone citizen journalists against the media blackout on news of politically sensitive events by enhancing the watchdog function and attracting attention from national and international media. How well do theories about digital democracy in general, and mobile democracy (Fortunati, 2002; Suárez, 2006) in particular, deriving largely from European countries, the United States, and other parts of the Western world, grasp the social, political, and cultural dimensions of Chinese society? To what extent can a conceptual framework that was developed with regard to western (digital) democracy be transferred to and contextualized into a Chinese context? Most important, how do people perceive the role of mobile phones in political participation and civic

engagement, and how do they understand this potential? Such questions are crucial at a time when China never lags much behind mobile communication around the world. My work addresses these questions with particular reference to a possible alternative new media culture and the political conditions that make such a culture desirable.

1.4 THE PREDICAMENT OF PARTICIPATION: Control over communication and political apathy

Understanding both tradition and the current state of Chinese society is quite important for understanding the power of mobile communication in contemporary China. China is undergoing a dual transition from a planned to a market economy and from a traditional agricultural society to a modern information one. Public grievances over the widening income gap, the aggravated environmental problems, jobless urbanites and fresh university graduates, and the inaction and corruption of officials have been mounting during the process of reform over the last 30 years (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences [CASS], 2009; Yu, 2011). The Chinese have become more cynical and less trusting of the government. A survey from *the People's Daily* (*renmin ribao*), the official media outlet of the Communist Party of China (CPC), found that more than 70 % of the respondents regarded the local official accounts as “hard to believe,” since they are always “keeping back the crucial information and reporting only the good news while holding back the bad” (Bo, 2008). Chinese society has become less stable, as indicated by the frequent occurrences of riots and mass incidents in the streets and rural areas, and by more than 10 million migrant workers losing their jobs as the worsening global financial crisis takes its toll on the country's export-oriented economy (Chen, 2009; Dong, 2009; Huang, Guo, & Zhong, 2009).

Political reform is essential to resolve these thorny issues, because they arise from the contradiction between the economic system that has been significantly liberalized, and the political system that remains a one-party dictatorship under the CPC. The 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, held in October, 2007, highlighted the goal of political reform, with the party's General Secretary Hu Jintao repeating the word "*minzhu*" (the Chinese word for "democracy"¹) more than 60 times in his report (Hu, 2007). Political reform centering on "Chinese-style democratization" (Zhong, 2007) will become the most important challenge for China over the next 30 years, although resistance from vested interests and other twists and turns can be expected.

Within a politically communist and culturally Confucian country, President Hu and the central government borrow "*hexie*" (harmony) from Confucianism, which itself is a combination of "*he*" (literally meaning that the people can enjoy adequate food), and "*xie*" (literally meaning people's opinions can be expressed). In other words, this term acknowledges that giving people the right to freedom of expression is as important as providing them with enough food. Ironically, "*hexie*" in practice reminds people of the expressions in the speeches or writings of certain individuals or groups being severely impaired or suppressed in the name of maintaining "harmony" in contemporary China. To me, this term emphasizes that we should shift more attention to people's practice of expression in particular and their communicative practices in general. Accordingly, and different from most existing studies that address the role of information (e.g., the "Information Have-not/Have-less" [Cartier, Castells, & Qiu, 2005; Qiu, 2009]), my study reveals that the information factor is only partly to blame. Because, even if you have information, it has little value if it cannot be

¹ The word "*minzhu*" itself has various meanings in Chinese context, see Guang (1996).

communicated with others. I instead adopt a communication perspective on those who have been deprived of means of expression, interaction, and communication, and thus been disenfranchised or marginalized from the mainstream discourse of Chinese politics and the dominant public sphere. As my next chapter and a few other studies (e.g., Zhao, 2009) demonstrate, a serious lack of means and mechanisms of expression and a stern control over communication do not just exacerbate the marginalization of the voice of the public at large in public policy and political processes, but they also consolidate the monolithic voice of the dominant party, guaranteeing the legitimacy of its dictatorship. To break the shackles of a lack of expression and communication, in practice, more and more Chinese people must exploit the liberating potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), including online forums, microblogging sites, and the mobile phone in this study in particular. Accordingly, new ICT platforms provide these marginalized or disenfranchised individuals or groups a good opportunity and encourage them to express their thoughts and share these thoughts directly with whomever they choose, forming “Imagined Communities” with the same interests and abilities against the authorities and their dominant discourse. Among them, how—and to what extent—can the power of mobile media assert telecommunication-based interaction and reduce biases in an uneven political playing field by facilitating political insurgents, who are deprived of resources and access to other media of communication, to compete more effectively?

Furthermore, mobile phones, to a certain extent, may also bring changes to the restraints on ICT under the rule of elite technocrats in China. Since the mid-1990s, a torrent of work on the internet and on revolutionized popular expression in China has poured forth, enabling scholars to consider how online users organize, protest, and influence public opinion in unprecedented ways (e.g., Zheng, 2008; Yang, 2009). But

there is another and exactly opposite aspect. The Chinese government has also become extremely adept at reaffirming themselves as central agencies in a new, informationalized economic regime, rendering earlier predictions that authoritarian states would wither under the sustained pressure of global and domestic crises far less certain. A close examination of the regulatory environment reveals undeniably that the Chinese government has acted as a vital driving force for boosting internet diffusion and online democratic expression with a subtle but effective control over new media technologies (Yang, 2001; Kalathil & Boas, 2001; Zhou, 2002; Lu & Weber, 2007; Weber & Lu, 2007; Morozov, 2011a, 2011b; MacKinnon, 2012). This practice, as an important part of “new authoritarianism” (Zhang, 2005) in China today, consists of the Chinese government’s opening of selected 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” (Lu & Weber, 2007: 927). A darker development is the abuse of online blogs, cyber networks, maps, and video-sharing sites that make it easy to publish incendiary materials; cyber nationalism is a perfect example of this (Wu, 2007). What is much more disturbing is the way in which skilled young surfers—the very people whom the internet might have liberated from the shackles of state-sponsored ideologies—are using the wonders of electronics to manipulate public opinion online. Sometimes these cyber-elites seem to be acting at their government’s or companies’ behest¹. What is dangerous is that their activities outdo their political masters in propagating dislikes of some unspeakable foe, or fuel and indulge people’s prejudices.

¹ For instance, in the 2008 Weng’an mass incident case, more than a dozen teachers who were familiar with the internet were selected and transferred from the county school, and they acted systematically and purposefully to dispel rumors of official meddling, blame the dust-up on a small band of rowdies, calm people down with comments on the internet, and even “use the Guizhou media to affect national opinion” (Ma, 2008). See more discussion on “*wumao dang*” and manipulation of public issues by government on the internet in *Chapter Three*.

Turning cyberspace into some kind of ideological tabloid decreases the authority and credibility of the internet, often discouraging ordinary internet users from participating in discussions again. That is why the internet media in China has become more frequently embroiled in complicated conflict-of-interest situations, and why online social networks and video-sharing sites do not always bring people closer together. With the invisible and omnipresent hand of the government getting stronger over the internet, there should be more inputs from *ordinary people* to counterbalance government's strong-handed manipulation and underworld-style behaviors online.

Against this backdrop, the mobile-phone-facilitated communicative sphere may emerge as a new phenomenon in China's political arena and ideological spectrum. Because, on the one hand, as the anti-PX demonstration in Xiamen shows, this communicative sphere can also be employed by people in direct conflict with the government's stance or strategy. On the other hand, and more importantly, this communicative sphere may include more ordinary people *without* much tech savvy in the wake of the increasing popularity of mobile devices and the huge rise in low-cost mobile phone use in contemporary China. Therefore, although aspects of digital democracy proposals to a certain degree are unable to achieve in cyberspace, such aims appear again as the proliferation of mobile phones may have the potential to initiate new means of political participation or expand or even reform the existing ways of civic engagement in China, a still largely agricultural country with a population of more than 1.3 billion as well as an uneven political and economic development.

1.5 FRAMEWORK OF THE DISSERTATION

Given the arguments above, this study on how people appropriate and use mobile media to initiate, organize, and mobilize collective resistance and popular protests in contemporary China grows in importance. For one thing, although in practice riots of a new, influential, mobile-phone-mediated public are increasing, it is less clear how the mobile phone functions and how it will contribute to civic engagement and political participation. For another, the topic concerning the role of mobile phones in collective resistance and popular protests in China is one that neither mobile communication research nor popular-protest studies have heretofore covered. In this way, my study to a certain extent breaks new ground in both the field of mobile phone studies and that of popular protests by focusing on the use of mobile phones in Chinese political participation and civic engagement.

Before I present the framework of the dissertation, I would like to include one prefatory remark on style. Throughout the dissertation, I use the terms “mobile phone,” “mobile media,” and “mobile device” interchangeably. Despite the slightly different technological aspects that they represent, I believe it less important to elaborate on the subtle differences of these technical features.

This dissertation consists of eight chapters and is divided into four parts: 1) this introduction, 2) a contextualization of “counter-publics” in China, 3) theoretical grounding and methodology, and 4) empirical findings regarding mobile-phone-facilitated collective resistance and popular protests in contemporary China.

PART I

The Introduction. This chapter observes the emerging role of the mobile phone as a tool and resource against the authoritarian regime and its highly controlled official media sector in contemporary China. It presents a snapshot of the increasing

integration of the mobile phone into contentious politics in China from 2003 to 2011—from its use as an anti-censorship toolkit (e.g., during the 2003 SARS epidemic), to its being a vehicle for organizing (e.g., during the 2005 anti-Japan demonstration), to its becoming an indispensable instrument in demonstrations and popular protests (e.g., during the anti-PX demonstration in Xiamen and the 2008 mass incident in Weng’an). Whether—and, if so, how—the mobile phone and its corresponding communication activities lead to the empowerment of Chinese citizens in their struggles for democratic expression, civic engagement, and political participation is the focus of this dissertation. More generally, what are the implications of these changing processes for the prospect of the mobile phone as a platform for generating and disseminating alternative content, formatting new spheres of communicative action, mobilizing collective action, and exerting political influence in the political and social arena in China?

As an alternative to common explanations that attribute antagonism, resistance, or rebellion to information censorship in a highly authoritarian country, I argue that communication concerns rather than information concerns play the more critical role in shaping the thinking and actions of citizens in contemporary China. More specifically, because access to public communication in both traditional mass media and the internet is limited and strictly controlled, Chinese people have been forced to adopt the mobile phone, one of the “personal media” as an alternative means of ensuring their right to communication. Consequently, more and more people simultaneously and voluntarily involve themselves in the struggle for a free flow of communication through a multimodal mobile telecommunication platform, including voice call, text message, real-time image and video, and so on. However, one must understand *the context* in which people use mobile devices against authority (i.e., the

social settings in which people suffer from communication controls) before one can explore *how* people use these devices (i.e., the role and function of the mobile phone in contentious politics in contemporary China).

PART II THE “COMMUNICATION HAVE-NOTS”—THE “COUNTER-PUBLICS” IN CHINA

Chapter 2 confronts the issue of communication control in contemporary China. Building on public sphere theory and, more importantly, on arguments about “counter-publics,” including a relational concept of “publics,” I propose a new framework to analyze the current state of control over public communication in China. Specifically, I address both communication and social relations in order to identify counter-publics in society. The new framework has two primary aims. The first aim is to help Western readers (who have vastly less knowledge of Chinese society than Chinese citizens) gain a better understanding of the social settings of communication control in contemporary China. The second aim is to provide a re-description of available evidence from the Chinese context that takes advantage of Western theory. As I document, Chinese authorities take advantage of their control over communication as an effective but subtle means to ensure and enforce its power and legitimacy, while extruding and eliminating “subversive” views and opinions from mainstream media and the internet, or even depriving people of their right to communication. Meanwhile, a variety of punitive and surveillance mechanisms force people to discipline and self-normalize themselves in public communication. This, to a great extent, leads to communication deprivation as a new “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1961, 1977) that relates to political, social and communicative realities confronting Chinese citizens today in their daily lives. Accordingly, I suggest a new

analytical concept to understand disempowered citizens under the party's strenuous control over communication flows—"the communication have-nots" that represent "counter-publics" in contemporary China. In short, the party victimizes its citizens into becoming the communication have-nots by depriving them of their means of communication for as long as it perceives them as a threat to its dictatorship and legitimacy. This discussion on the communication have-nots further translates European cases into a useful framework of comparative analysis in China by adapting the idea of "counter-public" as a tool for evaluating the ways in which communication is controlled by different political systems.

PART III THEORETICAL GROUNDING AND METHODOLOGY

Building upon arguments from Chapter 2, *Chapter 3* introduces counter-public sphere theory as the theoretical framework of my dissertation. This chapter also, in its first section, offers readers both an account of the history and current state of media, communication, and democracy in China, and a literature review of media and democracy in contemporary China. The historical account provides a general background to highlight the change that the mobile phone facilitates in the communication landscape and the possibility that mobile devices may generate democratization in contemporary China. In addition, I emphasize that both the party-controlled mass media and the internet tend to focus our gaze too much on "public" communication flows and their related public sphere, ignoring those invisible but relevant "counter-publics" and their resistance and struggles that are rooted in the experience of everyday life. As a result, I propose the analytical framework of the counter-public sphere to understand the mobile phone, everyday experience, and resistance and protest in contemporary China. More specifically, although there are an

increasing number of academic studies on the implications of the use of mobile phones in resistance and protest, theoretical approaches on the study of mobile phones lack a macro-framework to conceptualize the role and meaning of mobile communication in contentious politics in developing countries in general, and China in particular. On the other hand, the debates over the counter-public sphere call attention both to the articulation and expression of everyday experiences, and to marginal voices against the dominant public sphere(s).

In general, my research question may be summarized as follows: how do mobile media and the communication activities that they enable help to generate and vitalize counter-public spheres in contemporary China? The question can be divided into the following two sub-questions within this framework:

- How does mobile communication offer alternative spaces for representation, expression, dissemination, and mobilization—other ways of producing identity and articulating political agency and action in unauthorized ways?
- What are the characteristics of the mobile-media-mediated counter-public sphere and its potential impact in changing China's political, social, and media landscape?

In summary, the dissertation attempts to contribute to the field of mobile communication studies, as illuminated by theories of counter-publics and by taking China as the center piece. More importantly, the counter-public sphere theory designed around 40 years ago for interpreting mostly Western political cultures may not make much sense to mobile-phone-facilitated resistance and protests with a distinctive Chinese perspective. As a result, this research emphasizes simultaneously an exploration of the emerging role of the mobile phone in resistance and protests and contextualizing Western theory in China.

CHAPTER 4 discusses the methodology of my dissertation. Based primarily on fieldwork carried out between 2010 and 2011, including participant observations and interviews, my research is a qualitative analysis of multiple cases. It is, to a certain extent, difficult for researchers to study popular protests and social movements in China due to problems in collecting data about this kind of sensitive topic and the hard-to-reach participants. As a partial solution to that problem, this research involves what has been called the Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS) (Heckathorn, 2002; Wejnert & Heckathorn, 2008) design, a method that allows researchers to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to pinpoint hidden populations, such as citizen activists involved in resistance and popular protests in China. The RDS method adds to the methodological repertoire for ICT research. After locating those participants and getting approval from them, I conducted in-depth interviews with them on how they use mobile media in protest and resistance events to foster horizontal linkages among communities of interest, facilitate alternative communication spheres, redefine their identities, and challenge existing powers. I employ cross-case synthesis and explanation-building approaches for data analysis in order to understand people's perceptions of the role of mobile phones in collective resistance and popular protests.

PART IV MOBILE SOCIAL NETWORK AND MOBILE-PHONE–

MEDIATED ONLINE AND OFFLINE RESISTANCE & PROTEST IN CHINA

This part presents the research findings while advancing our understanding of the role of the mobile phone in resistance and protest events step-by-step in terms of different topics. *Chapter 5* provides a general background for understanding the distinctive characteristics of mobile communication and mobile social networks from a *guanxi* perspective. As this chapter advocates, only after understanding *guanxi*, a

commitment to relationship in China, and the *guanxi*-embedded mobile social networks, can we deepen our understanding of the role of mobile phones in initiating, organizing, and mobilizing collective resistances and popular protests. *Chapter 6* combines the discussion on *guanxi*-embedded mobile social networks with technological features of mobile communication, showing mobile-phone rumors as a low-threshold means of going against the authorities' censorship and communication control in six cases between 2007 and 2011. *Chapter 7*, based on two typical mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests in rural and urban China, provides a more general picture of the role of the mobile phone in offline popular protests. Although each can be read separately, these three chapters have been organized in a way that delivers a coherent presentation of the evidence and conclusions of the same topic: how the mobile phone empowers Chinese citizens, *online* and *offline*, in their everyday life to move against the authorities.

Again, *Chapter 5* highlights *guanxi*-embedded mobile social networks as a specific hotbed for mobilization and participation in the context of China. While *guanxi*, a unique factor in Chinese culture, increases trustworthiness—credibility, dependability, and conformability—of mobile phone messages, the accessibility, facility, and convenience of mobile technology contribute to rapid and widespread proliferation of identical messages within mobile social networks. As a result, the *guanxi*-embedded mobile social network has a huge potential for citizens to 1) spread messages more efficiently within their social network, 2) strengthen social connections, 3) mobilize their social networks and organize themselves on their own for political purposes, and 4) gather momentum in a very short time.

As a common practice in people's everyday life, as *Chapter 6* demonstrates, disseminating the official-labeling rumor through mobile devices has been adopted

and appropriated as a new way of *online* resistance and disobedience to authority and its hegemonic discourse in the official public sphere in contemporary China. On the one hand, by emphasizing the irrational elements of rumor, authorities attempt to not only censor information but also victimize people's right to communication for the benefit of the single party's monopoly of political power. On the other hand, people are turning to mobile phone rumor as a kind of "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985) to counter state propaganda, and struggle for the free flow of information and their right to communication. To forward and spread mobile-phone rumor is to construct a "resistant identity" (Castells, 2010: 8), although *temporary* only, against what authorities rebuke as "the many being ignorant of the truth" (*China Daily*, 2009). Moreover, in the counter-public sphere facilitated by the spread of mobile phone rumor, people articulate their life context in which they are suffering from communication deprivation and exclusion or marginalization from the official, hegemonic discourse and representation mechanism. In a word, rumors spread by mobile phone are powerful micro-political resources for individuals, in particular the less tech-savvy, against the dominant powers in contemporary China.

CHAPTER 7 specifies the role of the mobile phone in facilitating and coordinating people's *offline* protests and resistant activities; it also articulates the counter-public sphere through examining two concrete cases of mobile-phone-assisted popular protests. Mobile communication not only breaks through censorship but also organizes collective actions in practice against authoritarianism. Most importantly, mobilization through mobile phones organizes citizens' experiences and formulates their interpretations of social reality. Meanwhile, aided by camera phones and microblogs, citizen journalists appeal to the masses actively before and even against traditional mass media. All of the above nurture and empower citizens'

communicative engagements and further diversify and enhance their means of democratic expression and political participation. The political significance of mobile phones in the context of contemporary China's political environment therefore can be observed in the shape of 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.

CHAPTER 8 summarizes the role and implications of the mobile phone in counter-public spheres in Chinese citizens' struggle for the right to communication, civic engagement, and political participation. Thanks to mobile technologies, communication is embedded into much more profound political, cultural, and everyday contexts in contemporary China. The relevance of mobile media relies not just on its ability of providing affordable communication and generating new mediated "visibility" (Thompson, 1995), making the whole scale of society aware of certain events, but also on its capacity to carve out new spaces of expression, articulate people's everyday experiences, and accumulate their traditional social resources against authoritarianism. After all, the mobile phone is essentially only an effective means of conveying resistance or mobilizing messages, and could not in itself exert a decisive influence on national politics or democracy. The integration of accessible mobile devices with available social networks provides the communication have-nots in their everyday life various means of communication, recruitment, or mobilization in resource-constrained environments, leading to new power dynamics in an enlarged network society in China.

Before we look at the role of mobile phones in collective resistance and popular protests, it is necessary for us to first investigate the current state of the communication landscape in contemporary China. This investigation provides a

context and helps us understand why people shift their focus and communicative practices from traditional public communication to mobile-phone-mediated, interpersonal communication.

2. THE COMMUNICATION HAVE-NOTS

—UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION CONTROL AND “COUNTER-PUBLICS” IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

The collapse, resilience, adaptability, or transformability of authoritarian regimes in the age of ICTs has been one of the most significant research topics of recent decades (Horwitz, 2001; Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Howard, 2010; Nunns & Idle, 2011; Farivar, 2011; Meier, 2011; Morozov, 2011a; Anduiza, Jensen, & Jorba, 2012). Among authoritarian states, China is without doubt the most striking, and has attracted considerable attention around the world (Kalathil & Boas, 2001; Nathan, 2003; Gilley, 2003; Shirk, 2007; Zheng, 2008; Nathan, 2009; Zhao, 2009; MacKinnon, 2012). Nevertheless, most of the current research remains focused on censorship—the Chinese government’s stringent information blocking or filtering system and its adaptive suppression of the free flow of information (MacKinnon, 2009, 2011; Xiao, 2011; Morozov, 2011a; Bamman, O’Connor, & Smith, 2012). By shifting the perspective from information to communication, this chapter presents the analytical framework of counter-publics to look at the current social and political control under the authoritarian regime in China. To be specific, this chapter aims to address two questions: (a) how can we understand the authoritarian resilience in contemporary China through the idea of the counter-public? And (b) how can the notion of “counter-publics” be applied in the Chinese context while differentiating it from those in other Western contexts? By introducing the label of “the communication have-nots,” I contextualize the concept of “counter-publics” while crystallizing and underlining the

exclusion and suppression of the voice of the public at large in the dominant public sphere in contemporary China.

This chapter consists of six parts. First, I start by highlighting an emerging phenomenon in contemporary China: an increasing number of “voiceless” people air their grievances by taking extreme action as a last desperate attempt to make their voices heard and against unjust government practices and rules. Second, by introducing the critics of Habermas’s ideal of a singular public sphere from Marxist, feminist, and African American scholars (Fraser, 1990; Negt & Kluge, 1993; Asen, 2000; Squires, 2002), I establish the analytical framework of the counter-public to investigate those suppressed or erased voices in the dominant public sphere in contemporary China. Third, three types of disenfranchised or marginalized groups are accordingly identified to understand how authorities succeeded in silencing, excluding, or delegitimizing dissenting, critical, and different voices and discourses in society to remain “robustly authoritarian and securely in power” (Nathan, 2006). In particular, I focus on the specific and necessary criteria of counter-publics in the context of China. Fourth, I relate the means of depriving, suppressing, or marginalizing people’s voices—the control over communication in general—to the end of maintaining and legitimating the power of the regime, including “stability maintenance” (*weiwen*) as the current political priority. Fifth, I conceptualize the notion of “the communication have-nots” as the counter-publics in China by summarizing the common nature of these excluded or marginalized individuals and groups. Finally, I conclude and set up a new research agenda for next chapter by extending arguments contained in this chapter.

2.1 THE VOICELESS AND THEIR EXTREME ACTIONS IN CHINA

Fifty-two-year-old Fuzhou farmer Qian Mingqi was once eager to have his voice heard and to be taken seriously by authorities¹. He petitioned the government over the illegal forced demolitions of his home for over ten years. His petitions went unacknowledged. He sued a district party cadre, Xi Dongsen, for embezzling 10 million CNY (nearly 1.5 million USD) that should have been paid as compensation to the aggrieved homeowners, including himself and seven other families. No one in the local court responded to his suit. In a telephone conversation with Xi, Qian complained that:

You abused your power and sacrificed my legal rights...You have the court in the background. What is more, for saving its face, government won't solve my problem...You made me go stand in the corner. (telephone conversation recorded by Qian)

(Qian, 2011)

Still no officials concerned themselves with him.

On the morning of May 26, 2011, Qian finally made his voice heard through the means of three separate, synchronized explosions outside government buildings in Fuzhou, Jiangxi Province. The explosions killed at least three people, including Qian, and injured another 10 (Yan & Gao, 2011). Ironically, Qian's explosions had an

¹ For the reports on the synchronized explosions at government buildings in Fuzhou and Mingqi's grievances, see Liang and Li (2011), Wong (2011b), China Review News (2011), Aisa News (2011), and Shanghaiist.com (2011).

effect. Five days after this explosion, seven other evicted families who had futilely petitioned with Qian for nearly a decade were compensated for their trouble. Nine days after the explosion, Xi was dismissed from his position as district head (Chai, 2011; Ren, 2011).

Qian may have been the first Chinese person to blow himself up to demand justice, call attention to his plight, and challenge the current regime. However, Qian is by no means the only one to protest through extreme actions, such as suicide bombing and self-immolation. In fact, in the same city, a similar story unfolded less than one year ago. After trying in vain for months to protect their home by using the “property law” (*wuquan fa*), which bolsters protection of private assets and stems illegal expropriation, three members of a family in Yihuang district set themselves aflame and jumped off the roof of their house to protest the forced demolition by local government (Liu & Liu, 2010). In addition, according to the International Campaign for Tibet, at least 38 Tibetans have set themselves on fire since 2009, 29 of whom have died, in protests against unfair judgments, oppressive policies, and discrimination of the Chinese government (the International Campaign for Tibet, 2012). Official reports also demonstrate that suicide-protests, including wrist cutting, suicide bombings, and self-immolations, in an attempt to stop the forced demolition of their houses by local government have taken place in over 15 cities since 2003¹ (Human Rights Watch, 2004; Huang & Liu, 2009; Bing, 2011; Wu, 2011).

As the tip of the iceberg, these extreme actions exemplify a new direction in popular protests in contemporary China; increasingly, victims of injustices have been pushed over the edge because they were trapped in the despair of unsolved, long-simmering and, in particular, *unheard* or *unacknowledged* grievance. Put another way, people

¹ For more details, see the “Blood-Stained Housing Map” (血房地图) (BloodyMap, 2010), a crowdsourced project by Chinese bloggers that use Google Maps to plot violent housing evictions across the country.

have attracted public attention to their “voices” through extreme actions against authorities and/or themselves. Coincidentally, published on the same day as Qian set off his bombs, a comment from *the People’s Daily* admitted for the first time the phenomenon of the “sunken voice” and “the deprivation of mechanisms to express one’s interests” (The Editorial Desk of the People's Daily, 2011) in contemporary Chinese society. More specifically, this comment calls for listening to “those ‘sunken voices’”:

There are still many voices that have not been heard. On the one hand, some voices have been submerged in the vastness of the field of voices, so that it is difficult for them to find the surface. On the other hand, there are some voices that only “speak, but in vain” (说也白说), that make their wishes known but find their problems unresolved. These can all be thought of as null expression, and some have called them “sunken voices.”

...To hear and to be heard, this is a fundamental appeal for social persons. To speak and to hear others speak is even more a basic consensus of modern civilization. When the right to expression becomes a basic political right, valuing these voices is the starting off point for coordinating interests and rationalizing social mentalities...it is all the more important that the voices of the broad masses are heard and valued.

...Speaking is the foundation of asserting our interests. Only with the expression of interests can there be relative balancing of interests, and only with the relative balancing of interests can there be long-term social stability. The facts tell us that behind many cases of tension and conflict lies the deprivation of mechanisms to express one’s interests.

(The Editorial Desk of the People's Daily, 2011)¹

In the wake of Qian's synchronized explosions at government buildings, some commentaries warn that "the 'sunken voice' will turn into a 'sound of explosion' if the former fails to be heard and responded to" (Sheng, 2011). Moreover, the commentary from *the Southern Metropolis Daily (nanfang dushibao)* figures that the "sunken voices" are more than those from disgruntled petitioners like Qian; they "appear everywhere in our daily lives" (Kuang, 2011). If this is true, who are those voiceless, the people who have suffered from "the deprivation of mechanisms to express one's interests"? Why are these "sunken voices" unable to be heard? Understanding the voiceless helps give us an in-depth understanding of not only the disadvantaged and their sufferings, but also, and more importantly, the interest, control, and power of the regime in contemporary China.

2.2 REVISITING THE IDEA OF COUNTER-PUBLICS

2.2.1 "Counter-publics": The voiceless in the Western context

The voiceless are hardly unique to China. Instead, "voicelessness" has developed as a key characteristic of suppressed, marginalized, or excluded groups within the dominant bourgeois public sphere under Western capitalism (Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1992). To be clear, Habermas defines the public sphere as a "network for communicating information and points of view [in which] *the streams of communication* are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions" [emphasis added]

¹ For English translation, see Bandurski (2011).

(Habermas, 1996: 360). According to Habermas, the public sphere functions ideally as an inclusive and egalitarian discursive place through which “the bourgeois public’s critical debate [can take] place in principle without regard to all preexisting social and political rank and in accord with universal rules” (1989: 54). However, as studies unveil, the formation and function of the bourgeois public sphere come at the expense of voices of other groups in the same discursive arena in practice. For instance, throughout much of recorded history, prohibitions against women speaking in public settings largely hindered their participation in various forums (Borisoff & Merrill, 1985; Felski, 1989; Landes, 1998). Particular groups of people have had great difficulty raising their voices or distributing their ideas as part of a public sphere in either opinion-formation or decision-making because of their race, color, nationality, or ethnic or national origin (Herbst, 1994; Squires, 2002). In sum, claiming themselves as *the public*, the dominant male capitalist class maintains its hegemonic position in the public sphere through practices of exclusion of other voices from, for instance, the working class, women, Black people, and lower social strata of society (Calhoun, 1992; Negt & Kluge, 1993; The Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Squires, 2002). Being excluded from the dominant public sphere and deprived of means of expression, or even “the right to communication” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: 188) greatly disadvantage people in their struggles against oppression, hampers their efforts to advance their social status, and undermines their exertions for positions of influence.

Critical investigation of Habermas’s ideal of a singular public sphere reveals the exclusionary mechanisms of the liberal-bourgeois public sphere; a revision leads to the introduction of “counter-public[s]” that incorporates “a plurality of competing publics” (Fraser, 1990: 61), whose voices have been excluded or marginalized by the

dominant public sphere and its hegemonic discourse (Calhoun, 1992; Negt & Kluge, 1993; Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Brooks, 2005; Warner, 2005). In particular, the term “counter-publics” suggests not just a multiplicity of publics instead of a singular public, but also repressed groups that tend to contest their exclusion by the dominant groups in expression, interaction, and deliberation — which, in short, refers to communicative practice in the public sphere. Therefore, the term “counter-public” further implies the notions of critique, resistance, struggle, and emancipation with reference to communication through which those suppressed, marginalized, or excluded groups articulate their claims, interests, and desires in the public sphere (Asen, 2000).

However, as several studies have shown, the concept of “counter” in counter-publics remains an ambiguous term, thus leaving “counter-public” a vague concept. In her oft-quoted feminist critique of the public sphere, Fraser adds the term “subaltern” as a prefix for the term “counterpublics” and employs “*subaltern counterpublics*” [italics in original]

...to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.

(Fraser, 1990: 67)

By contrast, some scholars scrutinize this taken-for-granted opinion that considers the subordinate status as an unchangeable characteristic of a counter-public. Warner argues

Counterpublics are often called “subaltern counterpublics,” but it is not clear that all counterpublics are composed of people *otherwise* dominated as subalterns...At any rate, even as a subaltern counterpublic, this subordinate status does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere. [italics in original]

(Warner, 2005: 57)

In other words, counter-publics are not in a fixed and invariable position as the dominated. Nor is the prefix “subaltern” a fixed label to certain individuals or groups. Instead, counter-publics only exist in relation to a larger [dominant] public. More accurately, as Warner suggests, counter-publics “...are defined by their tension with a larger public...Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large” (Warner, 2005: 56). Likewise, in her foreword to Negt and Kluge’s critique of the public sphere, Hansen emphasizes that “the question of what constitutes a counterpublic...is a matter of *relationality*, of conjunctural shifts and alliances, of making connections with other publics and other types of publicity” [emphasis added] (Negt & Kluge, 1993: xxxix). Thus, by addressing and capturing the relationality behind the phenomenon of counter-public[s], we are able to locate their tension with other public[s], identify the reason for their subaltern status, and deepen theoretical understanding of counter-publics beyond simply labeling them as “counter-publics.”

In addition, for historical reasons, plenty of researchers have dedicated their attention to women, working class, people of color, homosexuals, religious minorities, and immigrant groups as counter-publics (Altbach, 1984; Felski, 1989; Calhoun, 1992; The Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Squires, 2002; Brooks, 2005; Warner,

2005; Halperin & Traub, 2009; Dolber, 2011). Nevertheless, by underlining the question “what is counter about counterpublics,” Asen (2000: 426; also see Asen & Brouwer [2001: 8]) warns against the reductionist perspective from which counterpublics may be reduced to persons, places, or topics. Squires (2002) also agrees that, “differentiating the ‘dominant’ public sphere from ‘counterpublics’ solely on the basis of group identity tends to obscure other important issues...” (p. 447). The introduction of a relational perspective also helps get rid of reductionism by focusing on a dynamic relation between the [dominant] public and counter-public[s] rather than the latter itself.

In sum, to understand counter-publics in a society, we should pay attention to the following two points. For one thing, the formation, resistance, and struggle of counter-publics are closely bound up with communication, or communicative practice. Just as Bennett and Entman address in their analysis of mediated politics and democracy, “...the key here was not only the institutional basis, but also the manner in which communication took place in this burgeoning public sphere” (Bennett & Entman, 2001b: 34). Being deprived of means of communication in the public sphere makes individuals or groups counter-public[s]. Accordingly, counter-publics seek alternative means of communication or set up alternative communicative sphere[s] in reaction to oppression from the dominant public sphere. The focus of resistance and struggle is placed on communication as well as on the way communication plays out.

For another, counter-public is not a fixed identity but a transient situation, a malleable product of changes in political relationships. As such, counter-publics should be defined and understood by their relation—more precisely, their tension—with the dominant formation that declares itself “the public” rather than by their own identities. In other words, counter-publics exist more or less as a relational category

that is relative to the dominant group in a society. A better understanding of relationality between the dominant public and counter-public[s] helps to not only enrich our knowledge of counter-public as a still poorly understood concept, but also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of concrete articulations of power relationships among different social forces in communication, thus transcending simplistic categorization of counter-publics based on identities in much of the studies on the counter-public.

2.2.2 Rethinking the public sphere and counter-public[s] in contemporary China

Returning to the aforementioned extreme actions in contemporary China, it is apparent that “the voiceless” share the same key characteristic with those in the bourgeois public sphere in a Western context: their voices, concerns, and grievances *struggle futilely to be heard* in the dominant public sphere. With this backdrop, can we apply the framework of counter-publics originally based on Western [historical] experiences to elaborate the similar situation in contemporary China?

In practice, studies have already, but very preliminarily, introduced this concept into the context of China (Zhao, 2009; Xing, 2011b, 2011a). Among these studies, taking a historical and political-economic analysis of communication and power in contemporary China, Zhao (1998, 2009) examines the specific patterns of communicative inclusion and exclusion enabled by the intersecting logics of the party-state and the market in contemporary China. Based on her arguments, Zhao depicts a “nascent Chinese ‘bourgeois public sphere’” (2009: 329) as a result of media commercialization since the 1980s. According to Zhao, this emerging Chinese “bourgeois public sphere” operates simultaneously “under the shadow of state censorship and is sometimes in tension with it” (Zhao, 2009: 341) and “under the

disciplining mechanisms of the market and the containment attempts of the propertied class and their organic intellectuals” (p. 329). As such, this public sphere “...subordinates itself to and partially intersects with a more traditional ‘party-state media sphere’ ...while dominating and partially intersecting with various old and new special interest media outlets” (Zhao, 2009: 341). Here, as it exists in “an ambivalent relationship with the party-state” (Zhao, 2009: 341) while being driven by the emerging capitalist middle class, the Chinese public sphere makes it distinct from its Western counterpart. More important, as Zhao stresses, “...a complete asymmetrical balance of media power among different social groups and different intellectual positions” (p. 329) results in the absence of voices from particularly the vast majority of Chinese (migrant) workers and farmers who neither have representations in media sections nor get the media’s attention on them. Given this argument, Zhao employs the term “counterpublics” in the context of China so as to describe those marginal “popular nationalist, socialist, workers’, farmers’, women’s, and religious and quasi-religious discourses” (Zhao, 2009: 341) in the contemporary Chinese public sphere.

Zhao’s discussion on the idea of the public sphere and counter-public uncovers much more complicated communication struggles in contemporary China. Nevertheless, her statement encounters criticism concerning the very existence of a public sphere driven by media commercialization in contemporary China. As one of the key critiques, Lee criticizes the misuse of Habermas’s public sphere in China and questions the idea that “the market has led to...the crisis of the public sphere” (Lee, 2001: 91). According to Lee, the public sphere is “...something that does not seem to exist” (2001: 91) in contemporary China, because the market-oriented media never challenge the party-

state's supremacy¹. More specifically, in Western countries, "media conglomerates are not the product of market monopoly created by the party-state" (Lee, He, & Huang, 2006: 600). By contrast, "China's market is structurally embedded in and intertwined with—rather than separate from—the state's policy, while the marketised media do not oppose the ideological premises of the party-state..." (Lee, 2001: 88). In other words, as Lee, He, and Huang elaborate in another paper:

The state is the largest capitalist stakeholder and has a monopoly on the majority of resources, authority and policy-making. Media conglomerates' economic interests are subordinated to their ideological mission; only by serving the party-state's political interests would they be granted economic privileges.

(Lee, He, & Huang, 2006: 586)

Thus, although the media have become dramatically commercialized in recent years, media commercialization has never brought to bear the type of power that is independent of (much less is able to challenge) the party-state (which Lee accordingly describes as "state-capitalist authoritarianism" [1994: 5]). Instead, in point of fact, marketization of media, which is part of the ideological and propaganda system, benefits authoritarian rule, promotes regime stability, and eventually helps consolidate the party's dictatorship in society.

Thus, does it mean that the concept of the public sphere has lost its value for the analysis of contemporary Chinese media? As I see it, the general meaning of the term "public sphere," instead of the specific one (i.e., the bourgeois public sphere), is still

¹ Heilmann and Perry named it as "China's Communist Party-guided capitalism" (Heilmann & Perry, 2011: 3).

useful to anyone understanding contemporary Chinese media. This differentiation between the specific and general meaning of public sphere comes from Huang's argument on issues of "public sphere" and "civil society" in China (Huang, 1993). To be specific, Huang distinguishes two ways in which Habermas uses the term "public sphere." One refers specifically to the bourgeois public sphere, to which Habermas devotes most of his attention and later becomes "...an abstract standard against which contemporary society is to be judged" (Huang, 1993: 219). The other is "in a more general sense to refer to phenomena of which the bourgeois public sphere forms just one variant type" (Huang, 1993: 217). More precisely, according to Huang:

In the usages of the term public sphere, he [Habermas] seems to be referring to a generalized phenomenon of an expanding public realm of life in modern society, which can take on different forms and involve different power relationships between state and society.

(Huang, 1993: 217)

Therefore, "state and society interacted to result in different kinds of public spheres, whether the 'liberal' or the 'plebeian' varieties of bourgeois society, or the 'regimented' variety under 'dictatorships in highly developed industrial societies'" (Huang, 1993: 219).

Given these arguments, I propose the public sphere in this study as *one regimented variety under the party's dictatorship* in the generalized phenomenon. More specifically, I see the public sphere in contemporary China as *a communicative space in which the party(-state), by virtue of its almost unlimited power, carries its power*

into society, seeks to exert its control over the whole population and, whenever possible, to saturate, influence, and permeate all aspects of society and everyday life.

Similar to the bourgeois public sphere, first, the public sphere in contemporary China also functions as "...the sphere of private people coming together as a public" (Habermas, 1989: 27). Nevertheless, the process of becoming a public in contemporary China means more party-state intervention in the sphere of society, or, in Habermas's words, "the extension of public authority over sectors of the private realm" (Habermas, 1989: 142). In practice, this public sphere is a place where the party-state makes use of various resources under its control (e.g., the media, public squares, and public occasions) to pervade and intrude into all aspects of life of the governed, to regulate speech and actions, and to coerce and manufacture "the consent" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). By taking over this sphere, in short, the party-state disciplines and shapes people into "the public" that submits to its rule.

Second, this Chinese public sphere becomes a useful and effective platform upon which the party-state makes its power and dominance more legitimate, expansive, and durable through the process of public communication. Similar to the dominant role of a stratum of bourgeois men in the bourgeois public sphere, the party plays the role of the *only* ruling stratum in the public sphere in contemporary China. Likewise, the party bolsters its own position and consolidates its dominance over the rest of society by taking advantage of this public sphere, particularly the media as an arm of the ruling party, as a legitimate way of engaging in public discussion and influencing public debate and policy (Lee, 1990: 5). Specifically, having an explicit mandate to support current policies, China's official propaganda machine also acknowledges the public's growing discontent when it suits them, which further maintains social and

political order and enhances the ruling party's legitimacy¹. In this way, the Chinese public sphere plays the role of legitimizing current dominance, including the political system that this sphere is part of, rather than challenging it.

Due to this distinct role the public sphere plays in contemporary China, voice, opinion, and discussion are strictly monitored, controlled, censored, and even manufactured, especially in public communication. Consequently, this public communication system selectively engages, facilitates, and excludes certain people in or from the public sphere in contemporary China. The exclusion generates counter-publics in contemporary China.

Given the above discussion, current studies on counter-public in China leave two weaknesses: first and foremost, the use of the same term (i.e., "counter-public[s]") in distinctive contexts fails to differentiate the Chinese counter-public from the Western one. In particular, the term fails to show a unique and comprehensive picture in which it is *the party-state* instead of the stratum of bourgeois men that not just dominates the mainstream discourse but also plays the decisive force to suppress and marginalize other voices in both political and cultural arenas. Second, discussions on the Chinese counter-public are still based, to a large extent, on the identity of groups, which is the very subject of criticism of what is counter about counter-publics.

Therefore, although the framework of counter-public holds great analytical value, it is of theoretical and practical importance to raise this question in analyzing the counter-public issue in China: who are the counter-public[s] in contemporary China

¹ For instance, in 2012, the party allowed the widespread reports on the purge of Bo Xilai, the former party chief of the mid-Western city of Chongqing, in the hope of calming down popular discontent about the high-level corruption within the party. Reportedly, Bo launched the crackdown on crime, smashing what he called "mafia gangs," arresting thousands of "crime bosses," and executing dozens (Simpson, 2010). But his move created an upsurge in popular discontent because many may have not been crime bosses, but those who fell foul of Bo (Grammaticas, 2012). In the propaganda campaign after Bo's dismissal, the party made use of this occasion to address its "resolution and transparency in self-discipline" (Xinhua, 2012b) and "dedication to the fight against corruption" (Xinhua, 2012a). In addition, the *People's Daily* also called for "maintaining reform, development and stability" (Xinhua, 2012e) after Bo's case exposed.

beyond the identity of these groups and how to differentiate them from their counterparts in the Western world? What is the exclusionary mechanism of the dominant public sphere to suppress or marginalize voice of counter-publics in contemporary China? In the following sections, I revisit the phenomenon of exclusion or marginalization with a special focus on the specific and necessary criteria of counter-publics in contemporary China. My argument is based on the materials that come from both case studies and the in-depth interviews I carried out between 2008 and 2012.

2.3 THE COUNTER-PUBLICS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Given the above arguments on both relationality and communication, I identify three types of counter-publics in terms of their relationships or tensions with the party-state, which is the dominant force in the public sphere in contemporary China. These three types are proactive counter-public, reactive counter-public, and potential counter-public[s]. The typology here is able to cover the range of people from the ordinary citizen (potential public), who has a normal relationship with the party-state, via the rights defender (*weiquan zhe*) (reactive public), who conflicts with the party-state for the defense of his/her legitimate right and interest, to what government calls “the dissident” (proactive public), who has an explicitly “antagonistic” relationship with the party-state. We start with the obvious one—the proactive counter-public.

2.3.1 The proactive counter-public

The “proactive counter-public” refers to individuals or groups that have been deprived of means of expression, interaction, or communication, or that have suffered in silence

by deliberate suppression or marginalization of their voices from the dominant public sphere, because of their open and proactive critiques or challenges of the party-state's authority on *matters of general public interest*. In other words, communication—including the open arguments and dissent against the party-state, public criticism of government, or defiance and disobedience against authorities—for the interest of the general public makes individuals or groups become proactive counter-public.

On the individual level, depriving people of their means of expression or interacting with others is targeted at an individual who openly criticizes the conduct of authorities, defies government, or airs dissenting opinions, and thus becomes an annoyance to the party-state. To silence their dissenting voices and eliminate criticism of the government, authorities at different levels increasingly employ restrictions on freedom and, in practice, create communications blockade in recent years. The typical tactics include “soft detention,” “enforced disappearance” (“被消失”), and “forced psychiatric treatment” (“被精神病”). Concretely speaking, “soft detention” keeps persons suspected of dissidence under house arrest with round-the-clock surveillance, without any means of communication, and bars them from contacting the outside world. To completely cut off detainees' avenues of engagement with the outside world, authorities furthermore forcibly deny access to them by dozens of informers, security guards, or plainclothes police (Jacobs & Ansfield, 2011)¹. Compared to house detention, which is always regarded as a “soft option,” “enforced disappearance” proposes an “extralegal” hardline approach to gag critics and stifle dissent (Wong, 2011a). Euphemistically, this notion connotes a kind of shadowy detention, which allows authorities to detain suspects in secret locations without notifying anyone of their whereabouts as well as the formal charges against them (Xiao, 2008; Buckley,

¹ For instance, the case of Chen Guangcheng, see Grammaticas (2011), Moore (2011).

2011; Wines, 2011b). In practice, the regime intends to deter critics or muzzle dissenting voices before these critics and voices influence others by adopting the practice of “enforced disappearances.” For instance, Ai Weiwei, a famed Chinese contemporary artist, suffered from “enforced disappearance” for 41 days for his outspoken criticism of a number of national scandals, including censorship and the deaths of students in shoddily built schools that collapsed during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (LaFraniere, 2011). During the shadowy detention, as Ai himself recalled, he

...ha[d] been cut off [from] access entirely to the outside world...it fe[lt] like a bean rolling into a crack that nobody notices. My direct reaction [wa]s that I have been entirely forgotten...The police told me clearly that there will be no meeting for me with my attorney, and no notice of my family. [my translation]

(Ai, 2012)

“Forced psychiatric treatment,” the last type, stands for the forced treatment of healthy people, usually political dissidents, rights activists, and sometimes petitioners, in psychiatric hospitals, most of which are under the jurisdiction of the police (Munro, 2002; Huang, 2011; Qian, 2011). For instance, according to Lv Yanbin, an associate professor at the Institute of Law, CASS:

Some government agents cannot tolerate the expressions which have negative impact on them. As a result, once facing petitions, for instance, these officials try to cover up the event by “incarcerating” the petitioners as psychopaths, rather than solving the problems.

(Chang, 2011)

In this way, authorities manage to cut off “mental patients” from the rest of the world, making it impossible for their voices to be heard by others. Even worse, psychiatric incarceration leads to long-term stigma associated with the “mental patient’s” social and communicative practices. As Munro reveals in his groundbreaking study of political psychiatry in China, “psychiatric labeling of this kind serves to stigmatize and socially marginalize the dissident in a way that regular criminal imprisonment, in the present era at least, often fails to do” (Munro, 2002: 178).

Put another way, compared to “soft detention” and “enforced disappearance,” committing protesters to mental hospitals not only enacts a “convenient and effective” (Zhifeng, 2011) method for the government to silence criticism, but *de facto* relegates them to the margins in the long run as a consequence of deep-rooted bias against mental illness in Chinese society.

Remarkably, as we have already stressed, the identity of the counter-public is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside its relationship with the dominant political force in the public sphere. Instead, this identity depends a great deal on the nature of that relationship, or, more precisely, how the dominant political force in the public sphere perceives these individuals or groups and their voices. Take for example the case of the blind dissident-lawyer Chen Guangcheng (Cohen, 2011; Grammaticas, 2011). Chen was praised in his early years by the authorities for advocating the rights of disabled people. However, his fate greatly changed after he crossed the line by exposing and opposing official mass forced abortions and sterilizations, which had been enforced as part of the government’s population control program. For this

opposition, Chen was jailed for four years, repeatedly beaten, and further imprisoned in his home for 19 months, forbidden to communicate with the outside world. Chen's case highlights the characteristics and nature of *relationality* in identifying the counter public in the Chinese context. By and large, as the dominant political force in the public sphere, the party-state does not welcome any criticism—much less direct attacks—to its rule and policies, particularly those that may endanger its dominance or erode its dictatorship. Consequently, how the party-state and its governing institutions perceive people who dare to question or criticize it and its policies largely determines the fate of those who do as well as the fate of their identities in the public sphere. As Chen's case shows, the party-state resorts to coercive measures (e.g., detention) to punish these outspoken people and prevent them from openly voicing and disseminating their criticisms, further turning them into counter-publics, *as soon as* it perceives them and their argument as threats to its absolute power.

On the collective level, a similar situation befalls groups of people, such as journalists and the “independent candidates” for elections in the grassroots people's congress. To be specific, the rigorous press controls have developed into a systematic yet subtle way to suppress critical voices and exclude what government considers “disharmonious sounds” from the public sphere. In particular, in recent years, the party-state exerts an even more draconian control over communications that would contradict the government's official line or directly challenge their political and financial clout. For instance, the party-state deliberately marginalized international criticism of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and ramped up its efforts to suppress anti-WTO voices in domestic society, while mobilizing its propaganda machines (i.e., the media) to sing a chorus of praise for the official policy of joining the WTO (Zhao, 2003). In 2008, officials at various levels muzzled coverage of the

notorious melamine-tainted milk powder scandal through preventing the publication of related investigative reports (Kwok, 2008; Fu, 2009). These reports would have not only triggered questions about corporate responsibility (because the whole milk industry had been involved in the scandal), but also, and more importantly, would have raised political issues especially concerning the government's failure to monitor food safety (Xinhua, 2008; Yardley & Barboza, 2008; Bandurski, 2008). The investigations on the collapse of schools in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake evoked similar oppressions from the party-state, including the party's propaganda department's ban on related investigative reports and the long-term imprisonment of activists who had been convicted of "revealing state secrets," after these investigations disclosed that thousands of children lost their lives unnecessarily because of the shoddy construction of schools, which was reportedly the result of corruption (Zhou, 2009). Likewise, intensive censorship efforts and widespread suppression of public communication had been carried out after the Wenzhou high-speed train crash in 2011 to silence investigative stories, erase critical reports, and eliminate commentaries on the cause of the accident and, not least, a possible cover-up by the government in a hurry to bury the wreckage. According to one comment from an editor of *the Southern Daily (nanfang ribao)*, the sudden directives issued by the Central Propaganda Department (Central Propaganda Department, 2011) meant that "hundreds of papers are replacing their [investigative] pages; thousands of reporters are having their [critical] stories retracted" (Shanshuiyilan, 2011). Overnight, all the media, including newspapers, journals, videos, and the internet, had to shelve their "harmonized"—a euphemism alluding to "censored" because censorship is normally done under the auspices of "constructing a harmonious society"—reports or headlines were retracted in favor of the party-state-approved

news. In this way, all media outlets and their journalists become “speechless” as authorities muzzled them and enacted a virtual news blackout.

In addition to its cunning news blackout, the party-state manipulates the press to distort, suppress, or marginalize the voices of those whom it regards as potential threats to its dictatorship, such as the “independent candidates.” In 2011, over 100 independent candidates (including academics, students, journalists, bloggers, lawyers, and farmers) ran for local-level People’s Congress elections, the lowest rung in China’s government structure and, by law, the only ones in which constituents can directly vote for their legislators (china.org.cn, 2011). Despite the fact that authorities have made a series of claims to broaden and deepen political participation (China Digital Times, 2011b), and that the number of independent candidates is minuscule compared to the total of more than 2 million contested seats, the fact that these candidates stepped forward without the party’s backing seems to challenge the deeply ingrained model in which the local congresses have been filled almost entirely with candidates from the party, or people endorsed by it. As a challenge to the party-controlled grassroots elections, independent candidates, no matter what kind of backgrounds and walks of life they are from, get in trouble with the authorities (Wines, 2011a; Chen, 2011). Party officials and police have responded, predictably, to prevent these candidates from participating in elections. In addition to technicalities to disqualify would-be candidates, such as threatening nominators or harassing those seeking to stand, authorities pull out “the big guns”—cutting off independent candidates’ ways of expressing themselves and communicating with others. On the one hand, in practice, propaganda departments order that “no news unit is allowed to interview the independent candidates, report or propagate [the story].” “No journalists are allowed to have contact with [them]” (China Digital Times, 2011a). Thus, some

candidates, especially those not affiliated with the Communist Party, receive virtually no media coverage. On the other hand, the Commission on Legislative Affairs of the National People's Congress indicated that "no legal basis exists for independent candidacy in grassroots people's congress elections." The results came as a bitter blow to candidates everywhere. Consequently, quite a few candidacies have been disqualified or revoked for no reason from the preliminary round due to a swift and determined official clampdown on the surge of this movement. In this way, the systematic control over communication not only curbs the freedom of the press and reins in journalists, but also nips dissent or criticism in the bud before it spreads.

Although censorship and restricted expression persist in contemporary China, they are quite different compared to the past. To a certain degree, authorities lifted the restrictions on negative reports, in particular those about disasters—whether they be natural (e.g., earthquakes) or man-made (e.g., poisonous milk powder or train crashes)—after the 2003 SARS epidemic, in which Chinese government's policy of tight censorship and disinformation led to out-of-control panic at the national level. Accordingly, media reports are far richer than ever before; for example, in either the case of the Sichuan earthquake or that of the train crash. Nevertheless, any discussion that relates to political issues, or that simply *may* have detrimental effects on the current political system remains an untouchable subject in society. As has already been discussed, muckraking reports on either the school collapses or the government's handling of the train crash were held back by stringent propaganda controls to protect corrupt and negligent officials; thus, indirectly, such reports would have challenged the current dominant regime. Therefore, neither the public in general nor the media in particular are permitted to delve deeply into these issues. In this way, the party-state intensifies its propaganda control both in the time leading up to key political sessions

(e.g., the party's congress and "*lianghui*" (the "two Congresses"), the National People's Congress [NPC] and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference [CPPCC], which by principle supervise the enforcement of the Constitution and the operation of all levels of governments.) and over the handling of sensitive political, economic, and social issues, such as corruption, injustice, and unrest that could erode the party-state's legitimacy or question or challenge its power.

In recent years, Chinese authorities have learned to minimize or crack down on dissent and critical voices in the public sphere through subtler, but usually more effective tactics: taking individuals or groups (the source of information) under their control, or engaging in intensive interference in these individuals and groups' communicative practice. This move marks a significant change in the regime's ability to forcibly ensure continued public quiescence: from information censorship to enforced communication restriction as social and political control. More specifically, censorship normally means not approving of or deleting negative information, which is increasingly difficult to do with the proliferation of this kind of information with the help of ICTs in a new communication environment. Accordingly, China's government realizes that stifling dissent and criticism is not possible simply by censoring those "sensitive messages" passively but rather from engaging in a more aggressive strategy of social and political control over those individuals or groups as communicators or sources of sensitive information. Just as Morozov points out, "...if censorship becomes infeasible, imprisonment may become inevitable" (Morozov, 2011b: 63). Furthermore, instead of the hard-line suppression that invites international scrutiny and controversies, the secret, disguised penalties (e.g. "enforced disappearance" and "forced psychiatric treatment") are better able to cover up authorities' true intentions while making it more difficult for outsiders to discover and

further criticize government misconduct. In short, this kind of takeover demonstrates that gagging the disobedient communicators helps the party-state move beyond a reactive, defensive response to a more effective one in order to suppress and sideline the voices of proactive publics.

2.3.2 The reactive counter-public

The reactive counter-public refers to individuals or groups whose voices have been muzzled or marginalized due to their resistance to authorities' policies or practice *for personal matters*. This is in contrast to the proactive counter-public, which communicates for the public good. Thus, they have been labeled "reactive" because they are compelled to engage in public matters when they feel that they themselves (or their loved ones) have been victimized, compared to the more altruistic and principled behavior of the proactive public. The reactive public demands justice for personal matters by petitioning the government or seeking help from the press for justice or redress *after* their private interests have been jeopardized by authorities. Therefore, whereas the proactive public takes an active, sometimes even aggressive, role in articulating a "common" interest, the reactive public struggles for more or less its "own" rights or interests in a passive way.

Nevertheless, the reactive public plays a major role in protests and other forms of resistance in contemporary China. According to Yu Jianrong, a scholar from CASS who studies social unrest, the predominant type of social conflicts in contemporary China has shifted from the intellectual-elite-driven proactive activities for rights and democracy (e.g., the student movement in 1989) to reactive rights protection activities in which workers and farmers constitute the major force (e.g., the peasants' resistance to land grabbing in rural China) (Yu, 2011: 5). In other words, the majority of

struggles or conflicts are about individual interests and rights—defending personal interests or protecting individual rights—instead of overthrowing the party or seizing the ruling power of a country¹ (Yu, 2011). In practice, the majority of citizens in current Chinese society are reluctant to directly challenge authorities for the sake of a still “elusive democracy” (Guang, 1996; Zhao, 2001), freedom, or rights in the same way that the proactive public does. At the very least, people only try to seek redress when their rights have been violated by the government, or they suffer from unjust or unfair treatment from authorities. Even so, their complaints and petitions still have been regarded as a “disharmonious sound” of sorts in Chinese society. For central government, these complaints or petitions will draw attention from the media both at home and abroad and stain the image of the “harmonious society,” in which “the political environment is stable, the economy is prosperous, people live in peace and work in comfort and social welfare improves” (*China Daily*, 2007). For local governments, more importantly, these complaints or petitions catch the eyes of the central government, further revealing their incompetence, corruption, or abuse of power and jeopardizing their chances for advancement. As a result, both central and local government hope to “eradicate” this “disharmonious sound,” albeit through very different spurs to action. For these reasons, authorities, especially those at the local level, prioritize the blocking of complaints and petitioners as the issue that is of most concern in their everyday work.

Generally speaking, through delegitimizing people’s resistant voices, removing their means of appealing to others and seeking help (e.g., the internet), and even detaining them at secret locations, authorities succeed in stifling complaints locally on the one hand, and preventing the petition from being heard abroad on the other. The highest

¹ That is quite different from the “Twitter Revolution” in the Arab world (Mungiu-Pippidi & Munteanu, 2009). By contrast, this kind of reactive struggles, to a certain extent, makes it hard for Chinese citizens to take power from the party with violence.

profile cases involve the “*dingzihu*” (nail household) and “petition-interception” (*jiefang*) (discussed in more detail below), both of which are constantly under fire from the government and deprived of their means of communication with the outside world.

Fattening the wallets of officials at the expense of property owners’ interests and even very homes, government land grab is the most common cause for conflicts between local authorities and citizens in contemporary China (Gao, 2012). Citizens have coined a new term for a household or person who recalcitrantly refuses to relocate due to compensation disagreements after the land is requisitioned by local governments and state-owned enterprises for new construction: “*dingzihu*” (Li & O'Brien, 1996; Hess, 2009).

To break down *dingzihu*’s resistance while legitimating housing-demolition activities, governments exert tight controls over communication by means of manipulating media coverage to convey their own intended reality of forced demolition on the one hand, and blocking or filtering any communication channels for *dingzihu* to expose the illegal demolition activities on the other hand¹. In practice, it is the monopoly over communication that is a key element in demolition activities because it effectively prevents dissemination of messages from *dingzihu*, who normally gain the public’s sympathy as a kind of “vulnerable group” (*ruoshi qunti*), thereby avoiding the backlash of public opinion. At the same time, the government directs news discourse to invalidate *dingzihu*’s resistance, including such accusations as “disrupting government work” if *dingzihu* try to stop a local government from

¹ For instance, angered by an official decision to raze his home for a high-speed railway project, Huang Wenwei, who had “a decent job in a company” as a construction project manager, drove a car into government personnel at the demolition site and then attacked four other men with a knife, trying to prevent them from clearing what remained of his family’s house. Before that, authorities had “blocked the blog by Huang’s wife about the illegal forced demolition of their home.” After a court found that the demolition was illegal, local government denied criminal responsibility and silenced increasing media attention to the case, see Rang (2011).

demolishing their homes, or “blackmailing government” when people disagree with the compensation or even have resorted to extreme measures to protect their property (Dong, 2010). For instance, Tang Fuzhen, a 47-year-old female homeowner, doused herself with gasoline and set herself on fire during a demolition dispute, hoping to stop the demolition of her house and the beatings of her family members by the local demolition squad in Chengdu in 2009. Even so, Tang failed, ultimately, to protect either her house or her family members from government infringement. Her house was torn down soon after Tang died in a hospital; eight of her family members, including her husband and son had been detained for “disrupting government work” (“News 1+1,” 2009; Dong, 2010). Forced demolition hurts not only Chinese citizens but also foreign citizens who enter into conflict with the government related to land grab disputes. Pan Rong, a Chinese New Zealander, threw homemade gasoline bombs at a demolition crew to protest the forced demolition of her house in Shanghai. Later, Pan and her husband were seized, their house was still torn down, and her husband was imprisoned for eight months for “disrupting public services” (Huang & Zhao, 2009). In short, by controlling citizens’ means of communication, including both mass media and the internet, the government has successfully isolated and undermined resistance from *dingzihu*, preventing them from being known to the general public, and further legitimizing the government’s actions during forced demolition.

If local government hurts people’s private interests by virtue of illegal practices (e.g., illegal forced demolition), in principle, people can petition about their grievances. Petitions in China, also known as “Letters and Visits” (*xinfang* & *shangfang*), are a form of extrajudicial action to seek justice from higher-level authorities (Yu, 2008). According to the *Regulations on Petitions in the Form of Letters and Visits*, citizens have the right to appeal to higher government, and the central government ultimately,

when they feel that they have been the victims of injustice or unfair treatment at the hands of local authorities. Through the petitioning system, complaints about local corruption will eventually make their way to the top levels of government and allow the government to probe the complaint, punish local injustice, satisfy the aggrieved individuals, and further solidify its rule.

However, in practice, stopping people from lodging complaints against government or officials to higher authorities, “petition-interception” has become one of the most notorious systems to suppress the voices of the reactive public. As discussed, one of the key reasons is that the petition activity, together with petitioners themselves, turns out to be a “disharmonious sound” in the eyes of the party-state, especially when petitioners flock to the capital to file petitions to the highest government offices. For that reason, in 2004, the central government implemented a system of incentives and reprimands for local officials to decrease petitions. According to this system, local officials would be penalized for allowing too many complaints to find their way to the central government (Landry, 2008). Consequently, to simultaneously satisfy the requirements of “harmonious society” from the central government and cover up their own illegal and unethical practices, local governments adopt various means to intercept petitioners outside the central or higher petitioning offices—so-called “petition-interception.”

To prevent the petition from being heard, lower-level government officials have developed numerous ways to silence each petitioner, the “troublemakers” in their eyes. Accordingly, to cut the petitioner off from communicating with other people has become the simplest yet most used technique. According to reports, local governments set up checkpoints to block the petitioners, or send “retrievers”—thugs hired by the local officials to round up the petitioners, ship them back to their home

provinces with the admonition that they stay away from the capital (Jacobs, 2009; Long, 2010). As a report from the *Outlook Weekly*, a news magazine affiliated with Xinhua News Agency, reveals, at peak times, over 10,000 retrievers roam Beijing in the hunt for petitioners and keep them from successfully voicing their complaints (The Outlook Weekly, 2009). Once intercepted, petitioners are detained, have their communication devices confiscated, and are subjected to “thought reform” and “re-education” techniques that range from cajoling and threats to extortion, beatings, and outright torture, and forced psychiatric confinement in order to scare them into keeping their mouths shut and giving up their attempts to petition forever. In 2007, CASS released a survey of 560 petitioners, in which more than 71.0% of respondents have witnessed increased oppression against petitioners; around 63.9% indicate that they had (at some point) been locked up or detained, without access to the outside world; and 18.8% had been re-educated through labor or sentenced to prison due to their petition attempt (Yu, 2008). Further, the violence against petitioners happens to anyone—peasant (Radio Free Asia, 2011), laid-off worker (Human Rights in China [HRIC], 2006), village official (BBC, 2011c), lawyer (Wang, 2010), family members of senior party officials (Zhao, 2010), or even the innocent (Kong, Wu, & Liu, 2011), once governments regard them, even mistakenly, as petitioners.

The fast growth of petition-interception is a great irony of the petition system, which is supposed to enable the state organs to communicate with the masses in China (Bernstein & Lü, 2003: 177-205). On the one hand, the central government seeks to empower people to speak out or register their grievances by informing citizens about their right to petition. On the other hand, the party-state requires local authorities to be on guard to maintain stability by reducing the numbers of petitioners coming to the capital. Facing pressure to fulfill the central government’s order, local authorities

crush this kind of “policy-based resistance” (Li & O'Brien, 1996) or “rightful resistance” (O'Brien & Li, 2006) disregarding the laws that were intended to prevent such behavior and replicating the political dynamic from before the laws were passed. Eventually, many petitioners abandon their petition once they become aware of the horrors that await them, but turn to extreme actions against authorities instead.

The suppression of people's voices when they are attempting to protect their rights is not limited to petitioners and *dingzihu*. In recent years, reports find growing public anger among the country's middle class, or the “urban elite,” who try to force authorities to back down on unpopular plans. However, once these “urban elites” argue against government-run programs, their voices have been suppressed or marginalized by authorities without exception¹. The suppression of arguments against the government's policies makes “the ‘silent majority’ of the well-off, urban ‘middle class’” (Zhao, 2009: 330) part of the reactive counter-public.

As a common occurrence in China, the suppression of the reactive public's voices and arguments for their rights-defense activities demonstrates the conflict between unrestricted governmental power and nominal individual rights. In other words, because the party-state's authoritarian rule stands above the law, the infringement of individual's interest and the exclusion and suppression of his/her communication by the government power can happen to anyone, regardless of socioeconomic class, region of residence, even nationality. Different from the proactive public, the reactive public does not act against or criticize authorities on their own initiative; rather, they are compelled to do so in response to government injustice that jeopardizes the well-being and interests of themselves and their families. Most often, they are trying to guarantee their rights or protect their property when government decisions [may]

¹ For instance, the anti-PX demonstrations to protect citizens' environmental rights in Xiamen (2007) and Dalian (2011), respectively, see China Newsweek (2007), BBC (2011b). For detailed discussion, see *Chapter Seven* on “offline mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests.”

harm their interests. No matter how different their intentions are from the proactive public, the reactive public is still subject to the same methods of having their resistance suppressed: silencing, suppressing, or marginalizing their voices in the public sphere.

2.3.3 The potential counter-public

Different from the previous two types, the last type of counter-public is an inclusive concept. It does not refer to any individual or group specifically, but to people who dare not express themselves openly for fear that what they say or discuss will displease authorities and bring trouble upon themselves generally. In practice, the party-state tightens surveillance to intimidate citizens and punishes the rebellion and disobedience, which has a chilling effect on others. Thus, the party-state manages to make people very aware of what they say, to whom, and with what possible effect, and thus to gag public opinion, at least to a certain degree, especially on matters involving the party and government. My argument is divided into two parts: the first concerns the widespread surveillance in everyday life; the second looks into the punishments and their potential chilling effects on society. In particular, in the second part, I investigate the unprecedented crackdown on microblogs spreading coup rumors to highlight the coercion by disciplinary power over communication practice in contemporary China.

Panoramic surveillance: From online to offline

To ensure that its dominance pervades people's everyday lives, the party-state continues its huge expansion in monitoring technology and has established an increasingly powerful and complex surveillance system capable of monitoring not just

landline, mobile, and internet communications, but also the everyday living environment (Branigan, 2011a).

For instance, although meeting fierce opposition from internet users, authorities issued a new requirement on March 16, 2011 to users of *Weibo*—the Chinese equivalent of Twitter—to register with their real names and personal details (Liu, 2012). Tweeters who refuse to do so will lose their ability to publish, comment, and reply to microblog entries. According to one of the regulations issued jointly by Beijing’s information, communication, and police authorities, the real-name registration aims to “...maintain the order of network dissemination... [and to] facilitate the orderly and healthy development of the internet” (Beijing Municipality, 2011). However, microblog users argue that the move follows Chinese citizens’ increased use of *Weibo* platforms to criticize government policies or vent anger over specific incidents (Liu, 2011; Baidu, 2012)¹. In other words, enacting “real-name registration” policies strips away the anonymity that has emboldened Web users to criticize officials and government. Furthermore, Chinese internet users observe that the real-name registration not only shows that authorities act directly against popular online speculation, but also demonstrates that “[n]etizens’ right to free speech is not even a consideration for them [the authorities]” (BBC, 2011a). Even the *Global Times* (*huanqiu shibao*), an English-language newspaper under *the People’s Daily*, published commentaries that demonstrated concern that “freedom of speech on the Chinese Internet might be further limited” (Liu, 2012) after the real-name registration requirement took effect.

Surveillance does not just operate online, nor does it only aim at those intrepid critics of the government, but penetrates ever deeper into citizens’ everyday life. As several

¹ The discussion on Sina, see http://tech.sina.com.cn/focus/NetID_2005/index.shtml, accessed April 10, 2012.

reports estimate, in 2010, over 10 million round-the-clock surveillance cameras had been installed in 600 cities across China: on streets, in stores, bus stations, kindergartens, schools, and venues including cinemas and theatres (Branigan, 2011a)¹. In addition, IMS Research, an electronics-focused consultancy, predicts that the annual growth in the number of surveillance cameras is more than 20% in China between 2010 and 2014, which stands in sharp contrast to market predictions elsewhere, most of which do not exceed 10% (Cnstock, 2011). The government claims that the camera system is part of the so-called “Safe City” program to control crime and traffic. However, as several reports have revealed, the government has taken advantage of surveillance cameras as a means of monitoring persistent petitioners, trying to stop them from congregating with others and blocking them from going to Beijing to air their complaints (Fan & Zhu, 2011).

Panoramic surveillance, including the real-name online registration system and the camera system, shows that the party-state is more determined than ever to police both online and offline activities in order to smother any hint of anti-government sentiment and to systematically reduce the space for dissent. Different from increasingly blocking attempts from “*outside*,” such as the notorious “Great Firewall” (Smith, 2002), government’s computerized censors, the panoramic surveillance is effective as an “*internal*” disciplining force to autonomy and private subjectivity. In other words, the surveillance is not only an invasion of privacy, but also—and most importantly—a design for Bentham’s “Panopticon” (Foucault, 1995: 195-228), in which the inmates, unable to communicate with one another, believe that they are under constant surveillance. Consequently, the mechanisms of surveillance not only generate some

¹ For instance, Urumqi reportedly has over 40,000 cameras to ensure “seamless surveillance” after severe ethnic violence in 2009 (Fan, 2010). Guangdong has installed over 1.1 million high-definition surveillance cameras—one for every 80 inhabitants—by the end of 2011 (Xinwen, 2012).

degree of anxiety, fear, and panic in citizens, but also repress the motivation of freedom of expression, discussion, and communication.

The chilling effect of punishment: Self-discipline and self-censorship

The motivation of self-discipline is nurtured not only by the invisible surveillance (“discipline without punishment”), but also by visible [physical] punishment (Foucault, 1995). In practice, the latter has an even more profound chilling effect on free speech and communication in contemporary China. For instance, according to Wang Songlian of the Chinese Human Rights Defenders Network, with the “forced disappearance” of Ai Weiwei and afterwards various charges that continued to go after him, authorities “...sen[t] a signal to other activists that even if you are well known it does not really protect you” (Branigan, 2011b). The arrest and imprisonment of citizens, in particular the internet users, for “speech crime” (因言获罪)¹ have made others jittery when they post questions about or arguments against authorities’ activities, which are not necessarily satirical or harsh (Cao, 2010; Yunxinet, 2010; Wong, 2010). Likewise, the punishment of “insubordinate” journalists makes the rest feel like walking a tightrope when they cover stories. Moreover, the thin line between negative news and taboo news is unclear and constantly shifting, which forces journalists to practice self-censorship to avoid crossing it and bringing trouble on themselves (Tong, 2009). As a result, self-censorship has deep roots in journalists’ psyches, forcing them to make a concerted effort to emphasize positive stories while eliminating negative ones (He, 2008). After four years in the field, a journalist at the provincial party newspaper admits that the single most important thing a newspaperman in China wants to keep in mind is that “the less critical reports you

¹ A word to describe people who have been labeled as criminals for words that offended the party-state or authorities, see Cao (2010).

write, the more safe you are.”¹ Thus, the press would rather remove controversial topics or content automatically to avoid making waves², instead printing “softballs” or the same tired old content, or simply throwing themselves into the “sea” of commercialization and entertainment (Zhao, 1998, 2004). Likewise, under the shadow of self-censorship, as Murong Xuecun, one of the most prominent novelists in contemporary China, admits, writers will choose not to write the sentence down if they “realize that it will for sure get deleted” (Wong, 2011). The difficulties and ugly retaliation that may ensue also greatly discourages lawyers from engaging in cases against authorities³. As Cohen sums up, the widespread, systematic official assault silences many outspoken voices who speak for

...not only those clients who oppose government suppression of religion, speech and association but also those who seek to challenge arbitrary residential evictions, environmental pollution, food and drug contamination, official corruption, discrimination against the sick or disabled or ...forced abortion and sterilization.

(Cohen, 2011)

¹ Interview with a 28-year-old journalist in provincial-level newspaper, Fuzhou, December 2010.

² Interviews with journalists in city-level and provincial-level newspapers and state media, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Fuzhou, and Shantou, December 2010 and June-July 2011.

³ The reports from Human Rights in China (HRIC) show that authorities have also used various procedural obstacles, harassment, and even kidnapping to launch an all-out attack on public interest and rights-defending lawyers (Human Rights in China, 2009), such as the accusations of “subornation of perjury” and “witness tampering” by police and prosecutors as a way of intimidating defense attorneys from questioning the validity of confessions when lawyers try to uncover serious misconduct by police. As Mo Shaoping, known for representing Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, argues, on the one hand, lawyers suffer from lack of freedom of speech. On the other hand, authorities use lawyers’ associations, a branch of government institutions, to help judicial administration bureaus punish lawyers and force them to “pay attention to politics, take into consideration the overall situation, and observe proper discipline” (Mo, 2010). Consequently, less than 5% of Chinese judges admitted that “they would rule according to the law if it conflicted with the instructions of their party boss” (Pan, 2008: 280). Chinese lawyers, in particular criminal defense and human rights ones (rights-defending, *weiquan lvshi*), have become increasingly more unwilling to take defense cases against those in power out of fear of being prosecuted or assaulted by the government.

Therefore, the constantly evolving and strengthened punishments have greatly compromised people's willingness to protest and communicate, especially with critical comments about the government and authorities.

Case study: “Coup rumor” and communication control

In the following pages, I show an example of how the party-state attempts to strengthen its control over communication by threatening criminal punishment, including for the somewhat elusive charge of spreading rumors. Specifically, by carefully looking at the case of the crackdown on the “coup rumor,” the latest and largest online censorship in recent decades, I take the discussion a step further and explore some of the latest strategies that potentially undermine citizens' motivation to engage in public affairs and restrict communication with each other.

The “coup rumor” refers to messages of “military vehicles entering Beijing and something wrong going on in Beijing,” which went viral especially on China's popular microblogging sites, such as Sina and Tencent *Weibo*, after the closing of the National People's Congress in the middle of March 2012 (G.E., 2012). The rumor alleged a coup attempt led by the CPC's powerful security chief Zhou Yongkang after the March dismissal of Bo Xilai, who was believed to have been aligned with Zhou. Although microblogging services had reportedly instituted a block on searches for Bo and Zhou's name and the word “coup,” Chinese internet users still succeeded in circumventing such censorship, even making the coup issue the top trending topic on *Weibo* quickly. In addition, the combination of increased censorship, lack of convincing information in traditional media, and validation of some earlier information—such as Bo's removal and his aide Wang Lijun's asylum bid—all fueled further online speculation about a grave crisis and a high-level political battle among party leaders.

On March 30, the central government suddenly launched a broad crackdown on the rumor. According to Xinhua, Chinese authorities arrested six rumormongers and closed down 16 websites for spreading rumors of a coup attempt in Beijing (Xinhua, 2012a). In addition, Beijing police announced that they arrested 1,065 suspects and deleted more than 208,000 “harmful” online messages quickly. The operators of more than 3,117 websites received related warnings and 70 internet companies that defied the warnings received administrative punishments, including forced closures. The country’s two most popular microblogs, Sina *Weibo* and Tencent *Weibo*, had been “criticized and punished accordingly.” Most importantly, accordingly to the official order, these two popular microblogs had temporarily stopped users from *replying* to other people’s posts between March 31 and April 3, which “could act to stop the spread of rumors” (Xinhua, 2012b).

Chinese internet users have, no doubt, experienced a chilling effect from the government’s crackdown on the spread of rumors on microblogs. Few anticipated such a large-scale crackdown as an effort to “cleanse” cyberspace¹, leaving Sina *Weibo*’s 300 million users and Tencent *Weibo*’s 373 million unable to comment. The majority of reports, commentaries, and analyses suggest that the crackdown, in particular the suspension of the user comments on two major microblogging sites, can be seen as a means of reining in the new technology after *Weibo* emerged as an explosively popular new free speech platform—for sending and sharing information—in China (Voigt & Farrar, 2012; Branigan, 2012). I partly agree with this viewpoint. Nevertheless, I argue that this viewpoint misses the most relevant aspect: if, as authorities and microblogging sites declare, the temporary commenting ban aims “...to stop the spread of rumors,” why did it not also disable the *relay/repost*

¹ Online interviews with *weibo* users in Fujian and Hangzhou, March 30, 2012.

function, which is the easiest way to disseminate messages, including “rumors”? More specifically, in practice, the easiest way to spread a message on *Weibo* is to “*relay*” it—you just need to check the “relay” button—rather than “*comment*” on it—a user must type something to leave a comment and relay the message. Therefore, as I see it, the ban mainly aims to prevent users from *interacting or communicating with each other* instead of spreading information (or “rumor”). More specifically, this ban actually has three implications as follows:

First, disabling the comment function prevented *Weibo* users from discussing or debating a question to any extent, much less delving deeply into it. In the *Weibo* platforms, “commenting”—means of talking with each other—can largely be regarded as joining in a discussion. The user can read all previous comments after clicking the “comment” button and revealing earlier comments. In this way, subsequent comments are based on previous ones. This process facilitates deeper discussion or investigation of a certain topic or problem. But after the ban, *Weibo* users could only relay the initial post, losing the ability to read and review others’ comments as well as the possibility of expressing their own opinions. Therefore, the commenting ban implies the shift of authorities’ controls from putting up firewalls so that domestic users cannot access [sensitive] information to establishing technological barricades that try to prevent discussions and investigations of political issues concerning the party’s dictatorship by stopping users [citizens] from communicating with each other.

Second, government makes use of this ban to reshape users’ conceptions of freedom of expression and communication. *Weibo*’s had clearly penetrated into the average users’ everyday life; according to Sina’s report, “over 300 million registered users on Sina *Weibo* now generate over 100 million posts every day. 9% are daily active users”

(China Internet Watch, 2012). By ordering the temporary ban, authorities caused a heavy blow to China's two leading internet service providers, Sina and Tencent. However, they also faced severe public backlash at home and abroad if they ordered a shut down of either the post or relay function. In other words, preventing posting on *Weibo*—the origin of this specific rumor—and stopping people from relaying messages (in principle, the mechanism behind spreading the rumor) would have been an *explicit* suppression of people's right to expression. Therefore, authorities sacrificed the commenting function instead, which is technically part of [commentator's] freedom of expression, but not as obviously.

Third, citizens' voices have been suppressed or subjugated by the party-state in the name of guaranteeing state interests or the public good, such as to eliminate "rumors" in this case. In other words, China's authorities have effectively moved inside of the legal system to clamp down on citizens' disobedience and on [political] protesters. As the crackdown on microblogs demonstrates, the government manipulates propaganda offices to stifle new media, and the most effective charge authorities now levy against them is that they are "spreading rumors" that are "harmful to the national interest" or "damaging to social stability."

In sum, the crackdown on the "coup rumor" highlights new strategies that the party-state has developed to govern its population, the potential public: to instill fear in citizens through around-the-clock surveillance on the one hand, and to frighten them by severe punishments on the other. In other words, the combination of visible crackdowns (i.e., punishments) and invisible censorship (i.e., surveillance) is intended to intimidate users with the omnipresent authority of the party-state. Furthermore, suppressing or constraining free expression and communication among the public at large suggests a high degree of government angst about potential trouble and social

and political unrest from citizens' satires, disobedience, arguments, and even mundane interactions and discussions. In addition, if the suppression of the voices of proactive and passive publics demonstrates authorities' crackdown on dissent, criticism, and disobedience, the gag of the potential public shows that the regime tends to exercise near-total control over communication with the goal of eliminating "disharmonious voices" and guaranteeing its dictatorship and legitimacy. Thus, the primary impetus for the party-state's monopolistic control today is direct political interest. To maintain a harmonious appearance of Chinese society, the party-state finds every method to maintain its dominant voice in the public sphere while silencing, marginalizing, and heading off different voices. The suppression, restriction, and marginalization of communication exacerbate people's status, leaving them as counter-publics in contemporary China.

2.4 COMMUNICATION CONTROL IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

2.4.1 Communication control and "stability maintenance"

In contemporary China, exerting harsh control over communication by legal and extralegal means has become a common and advanced method for the party-state to maintain the legitimacy of its dictatorship while delegitimizing and eliminating the voice of critics and arguments against it. More specifically, on the one hand, of its different means of control, controlling communication serves as a pivotal pillar of guaranteeing the interest, dominance, and legitimacy of the party-state, which accordingly becomes the specific exclusionary mechanism of the public sphere in contemporary China. On the other hand, in addition to suppressing other voices and

dissenting opinions, the regime also diversifies its propaganda machines in order to consolidate its domination over the public sphere and maintain social and political stability, making it hard for people to recognize and detect the government's hidden controls over and manipulation of communication. The so-called "*wumao dang*" (fifty-cent party) on the internet is a case in point.

After becoming aware of the complicated online environment—in particular the increased difficulties associated with censoring abundant information online—the Chinese government recruited tens of thousands of "*wumao dang*" in a sophisticated attempt to scour the internet for bad news, then negate it, and shape [online] public opinion. The *Global Times* reveals that, as early as 2004, several local governments started to pay 50 cents RMB (around 8 cents USD) per post that is favorable to the government to internet commentators (Zhang, 2010). It is considered the origin of the term "*wumao dang*." Distinguished from the cyber police, whose main function is to detect and block sensitive information, the members of the "*wumao dang*" now are government-sponsored or government-organized "internet commentators" who pretend to be ordinary internet users to spin issues from the party or government standpoint without revealing their real identities. By virtue of these *wumao dang*, the party-state struggles to create the impression that the tide of [online] public opinion supports the government, putting social and psychological pressure to conform people with critical views, and thereby presumably reducing the possibility of anti-government collective action and social instability. The emergence of *wumao dang* shows an alternative, active yet veiled form of intervention into the realm of [online] communication by authorities with the aim of maintaining public order and stability by influencing and manipulating people's minds and shaping [online] public opinion.

In recent years, remarkably, communication control has been increasingly integrated into “stability maintenance,” which has become a top political priority for the party-state. In practice, by and large, communication control as an aggressive tool of repression increasingly appears in the guise of “maintaining stability” or “preserving harmony.” Consequently, these two terms have usually become “a pleasant-sounding euphemism for crushing dissent” (Yu, 2012). The party-state devotes a huge amount of resources to trying to achieve these goals and further managing popular views of all issues. For instance, state expenditures targeting Chen Guangcheng alone, including hiring hundreds of police and informants to monitor Chen and blocking visitors to his home, ran into the millions (Lam, 2012). To monitor and suppress dissent means that a local district is able to enjoy “millions in stability maintenance funds” (Yu, 2012). The high cost of social and political control results in a significant upsurge in expense to maintain stability. The latest statistics in 2012 show that the government has allocated 701.8 billion CNY (111.4 billion USD) to “stability maintenance,” surpassing the defense budget, which is 670.3 billion CNY (106.4 billion USD) (Zheng, 2012). Moreover, the number of people involved in “maintaining stability,” including the police, the People’s Armed Police (PAP) Force, courts and prison system personnel and so on, is greater than the number of active duty members of the People’s Liberation Army and reserves (Blasko, 2012: 6). The party-state’s obsession with maintaining stability reveals its anxiety about the erosion of its political authority and control over society, especially the challenges from the growing power of both the internet and grassroots movements. This anxiety has forced the party-state to work harder to crack down against any [potential] *perceived* dissidents by relying increasingly on social and political control, particularly communication control, for regime legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, maintaining stability develops into an excuse for authorities to employ communication control by cracking down on public exposés of corruption, suppressing uprisings of populist anger, cloaking its failures in secrecy or propaganda, and playing down an even greater degree of scrutiny and criticism over social injustice. According to Yu Jianrong:

[T]he rulers constantly resort to a range of measures that have ultimately formed a structure of unyielding stability (刚性稳定)...The rulers are at all times in a state of high vigilance, striving to utilize all resources to protect their ruling status.

(Yu, 2011: 38)

The result is harsh. When the Western world focuses on Chen Guangcheng's plight, lawyer Pu Zhiqiang reminds us that Chen's story is not atypical. In fact, "every province, every place has its own Chen Guangchengs, people who are kept under control and silenced without any legal basis or appeal" (Buckley, 2012). In other words, strong-arm tactics to deprive people of freedom in general, and of means of expression and communication in particular, are common in contemporary China.

In short, in contemporary China, the party-state seeks to develop mechanisms that will presumably enable it to perpetuate its dictatorship. In particular, under the slogan of "maintaining stability," the party-state has escalated repression to perpetuate, justify, and strengthen its rule over the Chinese people through the socio-political dimension of control (Morozov, 2011b)—the control over communication (communicators). In this way, the regime is more resilient in the era of ICT through a combination of old and new authoritarian methods, such as forcing the media to toe

the party line and eliminating any “disharmonious voices,” including dissent, criticism, disobedience—even *potentially* threatening activities. Within these parameters, the party-state’s voice has been propagandized and magnified while the enforced silence suppresses or marginalizes dissident voices, leaving them as different types of “counter-public[s]” in the dominant public sphere. Here, in light of my discussion, I propose the following two conceptions that not only advance but also contextualize our understanding of counter-publics in contemporary China: (a) shifting the focus from information to communication and (b) shifting the focus from the “have-less” to the “have-not.”

2.4.2 Shifting the focus from information to communication

Drawing from the discussion on adaptive social and political control, I suggest a communication perspective, instead of the previous one grounded in information, to understand the dominant and dominated in contemporary China.

As my argument shows, on the one hand, communication plays a central role in demands and grievance expression in contemporary China. To be specific, if a person is unable to communicate with others, it is impossible for one’s voice to be heard, story known, attitude comprehended, and suffering appreciated. This would be analogous to a data-filled computer with no internet access: nobody knows what kind of information you have or even where you are (e.g., the case of Ai Weiwei). Your information cannot be put to its optimal use, and, to some extent, your own use of this information is limited. Against this backdrop, information is insignificant without communication. Particularly in today’s networked society, as Zhao highlights, “communication... seems to have never been so central to the processes of political legitimation, capital accumulation, social relations restructuring, and cultural

transformation” (Zhao, 2009: 339). *Cutting off communication not only isolates information but also disconnects people from society.* Therefore, lack of means of expression and communication pushes people to the margins of society. That is why the comment from *the People’s Daily* observes that “...to a large extent, those who are disadvantaged in terms of expression [for instance, those who are voiceless] are also those who are disadvantaged in real terms...” (The Editorial Desk of the People’s Daily, 2011). In this respect, the capacity to express, interact, and communicate information is more important than holding information alone.

On the other hand, the control of and restrictions on communication reflect the regime’s recognition of the importance of communication as the basis of information flow in maintaining a relatively monolithic discourse in the public sphere and preserving its dictatorship and privileges. Put otherwise, the party-state is well aware that, against the backdrop of the proliferation of ICTs in Chinese society, it becomes increasingly difficult to [fully] control the dispersion of information via technology-based means and efforts. Instead, the social and political control has emerged as a more effective and insidious way to restrict information access and suppress communicative activities. The tightening control over communication also indicates that governments have gradually realized the power of communication. Therefore, the party-state combines the communicational constraint, through which the citizen’s communicative practices have been blocked or constrained, with the “communicational advantage, through which the governmental messages are expected to widely spread” (Wu, 2009: 81). Serving as the most significant operation of the exclusionary mechanism, control over communication not only defends the monopoly of the official party-state discourse in the public sphere, but also defines a new, hegemonic mode of domination in China. Therefore, by shifting our focusing from

information to communication, particularly government's control over communication, we are able to pay attention to this new kind of control approach and dominant strategy that effectively restricts people's communicative practice beyond traditional censorship. Furthermore, we may also be able to observe the emerging conflicts concerning means of communication and rights to communication in contemporary Chinese society.

2.4.3 Shifting the focus from “have-less” to “have-not”

Both of the phrases “have-less” and “have-not” emerge as the linchpin of the discussion on the relationship between information access and power. In particular, by exploring the stratified patterns of information access and utilization within low-income groups, Cartier, Castells and Qiu (2005) identify this relatively ignored urban underclass as the “information have-less.” Against the backdrop of the proliferation of low-cost ICT devices, the “information have-less” refers to a class of information users in China whose technologies and practices “are not reliably supported by the state,” and, moreover, “the state has intermittently constrained their expansion” (Cartier et al., 2005: 10). Although they constitute the largest proportion of the country's ICT consumer market, the information have-less experience a “lack of power” (Cartier et al., 2005: 10) and are “vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the market as well as unfavorable state policies, which is ultimately detrimental to their material interests” (Cartier et al., 2005: 26). As a result, Cartier et al. note that “the question of equality becomes in some ways more pressing when China's urban underclass achieves limited informational access” (Cartier et al., 2005: 29).

Given the deeply unbalanced set of communication materials and practices between the party-state and people, I propose the term “have-nots” to describe ordinary

citizens with very limited resources to amplify and broadcast their voices and interact with each other in public communication in contemporary China. Here, the term “have-nots” is more or less a metaphor for describing means of communication as a scarce and relevant resource in people’s hands. On the one hand, the party-state has a monopoly on communication resources: it has taken full control of the ICT infrastructure, exerted clear power over all mass media, and attempted to manipulate the news media, making propaganda increasingly prevalent everyday lives. In addition, the party-state also has taken control of the tools of repression in information transformation and communication practice. By contrast, the public at large remains in a relatively disadvantaged position in its battle with authorities with regard to resources and means of expression and communication. In particular, the counter-publics have been deprived of most means of expression and communication in their struggles against the authorities and accordingly have been disenfranchised or marginalized from the mainstream discourse of Chinese politics.

In principle, the metaphor “have-nots” may be somewhat exaggerated (unless you have suffered from, for instance, “enforced disappearance”) because most people have not been (physically) totally cut off from expression and communication. However, given how few resources ordinary people have, this exaggeration here highlights stark inequalities in both communication resources and practices in society and the disadvantages and vulnerability of some citizens in the struggle for expression and communication in the face of a powerful party-state and its hegemonic discourse in the public sphere. Accordingly, a sharp division between the “have-less” and “have-nots” makes little sense so I therefore adopt the term “have-nots.”

In summary, by examining the party-state’s current dominance in and control of Chinese society, we highlight communication control as a salient part of social and

political control by the party-state in contemporary China. In particular, we observe that this kind of control has frequently been carried out under the new name of “maintaining stability.” Actually, the party-state uses this mechanism for its own ends in order to stay in power. This new strategy calls for us to shift our attention from information to communication. Meanwhile, the tightening control over communication also results in a seriously unbalanced distribution of communication resources in society: more precisely, between the party-state and ordinary citizens. Accordingly, I suggest the term “have-nots” to describe and highlight this kind of fundamental, stark inequality in the communication sphere. In short, the sophisticated control turns Chinese people into the “have-less” or even “have-nots” in terms of communication. The combination of these two creates the term “communication have-nots,” which I suggest in next section as the Chinese equivalent of the term “counter-public.”

2.5 THE COMMUNICATION HAVE-NOTS IN CHINA

Given the above arguments emphasizing both communication and “have-nots,” I propose the term “the communication have-nots” as the Chinese “counter-publics” to refer to those individuals or groups that have been suppressed or marginalized in the public sphere in contemporary China. In other words, people have been turned into “the communication have-nots” when they have been deliberately and systematically excluded from meaningful participation in the public sphere by depriving them of their means of communication (e.g., expression, interaction, and discussion) and thus have been denied the opportunity to express themselves or interact with each other in public communication.

Remarkably, “the communication have-nots” describes both individuals and groups with limited access to *public communication* at the macro level in contemporary China. By employing this term, I emphasize both visible and invisible restrictions and constraints that have been imposed by the party-state in public communication to limit and control communicative behaviors. The term focuses on more than just political communication—because, as our cases have already demonstrated, the party-state intends to eliminate *any* communication practices and erase any information if it *perceives* them as threats to its legitimacy and power. Therefore, it is unnecessary here to distinguish political communication from public communication in general.

Furthermore, this term has three advantages as follows:

First, it is based on the context of contemporary Chinese society rather than Western societies. In other words, rather than proving the Western theories, I develop the term of “the communication have-nots,” which refers to “counter-publics” in the public sphere in contemporary China, as a new analytical concept appropriate to the local values, situations, and culture. As an analytical concept, this term provides means for comprehending the complex picture of the public communication landscape in contemporary China. In addition, this term can also be used as a tool for further social, political, and economic analyses to probe the problem of inequality in either political or economic fields in contemporary China, because expression and communication influence not only the public sphere but other domains as well.

Second, this term reminds us of what the term “have-less” overlooks—the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people suffer from a lack of access to public communication and have virtually very little influence on the mass-mediated public sphere. In other words, the serious problem in contemporary China, however, is not

insufficient (i.e., have-less) access to public communication, it is that people are simply not entitled to (i.e., have-nots) access to public communication.

Third, this term recalls the key nature of relationality of counter-publics. To be specific, the term “the communication have-nots” ineluctably implies its opposite—“the communication haves,” which refers to both executive agents (e.g., different levels of governments) and representatives of the party-state with rich resources in communication practice. Thus, these twins concepts remind us that “the communication have-nots” exist in tension with “the communication haves.” Accordingly, this term calls for deeper understanding of the tension between “the communication have-nots” and “the communication haves.” In other words, the term “the communication have-nots” requires more focus on the reasons for the status of the “have-nots” from a relational perspective: particularly, from the perspective of “the communication haves.” In this way, this relational concept avoids reducing counter-publics to a specific person or group.

Fourth, this term points out not just the key idea of counter-publics theory but also directions for future research on new forms of social resistance in contemporary Chinese media studies. Drawing on a communication perspective, this concept goes to the heart of both counter-publics theory and the exclusionary mechanism of the public sphere in contemporary China all at once. In this way, this term shifts our focus from traditional information censorship to the latest structure of hegemony and dominance, which reveals the party-state’s up-to-date strategy for repressing opposition and manipulating public opinion. Specifically, this term recognizes that *suppression of communication* serves an important delegitimizing function, and that this penalty, mediated by the party-state and government agencies, has a significant negative influence on Chinese citizens’ resistance, protests, and everyday lives. Thus, it is

necessary for us to focus more attention on the “communication have-nots” and especially on their struggles related to *rights to and means of communication* in contemporary China.

In sum, the concept of “the communication have-nots” calls for us to shift the focus from information to communication when we address the regime’s resilience and people’s struggles over power and democracy in contemporary China. Because the free flow of information largely depends on unrestricted communication, which not only contributes to open access to information but also promotes the right to freedom of expression, interaction, and discussion. Thus, guaranteeing the right to communication not only ensures [free] flow of information but also promises a voice to the underclass and, to a certain degree, balances different discourses: in particular, between the dominant public and counter-publics in the public sphere. Moreover, whether it is expression, interaction, discussion, or basically anything else, communication is in itself a special type of *action*; communication not only entails the meaning of information but also generates additional meanings of information, just as what we see from the case of the coup rumor. Therefore, this term reminds us that the right to communication, more than anything else, is exactly what people desperately need in contemporary China. As such, it suggests that we shift our concerns from the dominant propaganda system of the party-controlled mass media to the marginalized voices of subaltern groups that proliferate against the backdrop of the popularization of ICTs, especially the internet and mobile phones. In particular, the concept calls for us to emphasize how “the communication have-nots” struggle for changing their status of “have-nots” and making their voices heard in the dominant public sphere.

2.6 FROM COUNTER-PUBLICS TO COUNTER-PUBLIC

SPHERE

This chapter takes a new perspective on power and dominance in China by focusing on the regime's control over communication. By looking at "counter-publics" in the Chinese public sphere, I investigate how the party-state strengthens its controls over freedom of expression; deprives people of means of expression, interaction, and communication; and excludes or marginalizes their voices from the public sphere. As the discussion unfolds, the control over communication has played a major role in ensuring regime resilience and solidifying its legitimacy in contemporary China. Therefore, I propose the term "the communication have-nots" to describe counter-publics in the public sphere in contemporary China.

Given the above discussion, as I already mentioned, we need to accordingly turn our attention to struggles concerning communication, or specifically, means of communication and rights to communication. To be sure, just as several studies propose, in order to get a complete picture of counter-publics, we should figure out "how different public spheres, composed of members of marginalized groups, respond to various political, social, and material constraints" (Squires, 2002: 447). In the context of China, likewise, we need to explore how "the communication have-nots" are reacting to controls over communication and how "the communication have-nots" struggle for their rights to communication in particular with the help of ICTs. This struggle over communication from "the communication have-nots" not only emerges as a relevant challenge to the party-state's monopoly over communication resources but also as a key phenomenon in civic engagement and political participation in

contemporary China. It also calls for a new analytic framework to investigate media and democratization in contemporary China, which is the focus of next chapter.

3. Mobile Media, Democracy, and the Counter-Public

Sphere:

Toward a New Framework for Media and Democracy in China

Worldwide interest in media and democracy in China has generated voluminous, rich, and diverse scholarship. Some scholars credit the reduction or decentralization of the party's control over the media and the following potential to the democratic changes under the influence of commercialization and globalization since the market-oriented reform in 1992 (Lull, 1991; Lynch, 1999; Akhavan-Majid, 2004; Sparks, 2008). For others looking for new venues for freedom of expression and democratic aspirations, the profit-driven tendencies associated with extensive media commercialization have undermined liberalization of the media system, which thus has failed to unlock the public sphere and to challenge the authoritarian regime (Huang & Yu, 1997a; Zhao, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2009). Some scholars portray the resilience of the party and its authoritarian rule in particular as the result of its effective monopoly on and manipulation of the media (Lee, 1990a, 1994, 2000; Latham, 2000; Lee, 2003; Lee, He, & Huang, 2006; He, 2008; Brady, 2008). For others, the rapid rise of new media and ICT-related outlets (e.g., the internet, mobile phones, and social networking) as platforms for reviving popular engagement in decision-making processes has shed new light on topics of democratic practice and political participation, thereby bringing hope to those who hope to promote democracy (Yang, 2003a; Yang & Calhoun, 2008; Zheng, 2008; Yang, 2009; Hu, 2009; Lagerkvist, 2010).

Although the consensus among scholars is that one cannot attain democracy in Chinese society without achieving the democratization of its communication systems (i.e., the media), they have developed different approaches to explore the role of media and its impact on democratization in China (Huang & Yu, 1997b; Zhao, 1998: 9; Lee, 2000; Zhao, 2009; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). This chapter offers a complementary perspective to investigate struggles from those suffering from social exclusion or marginalization, which very few studies have focused on. In particular, I provide a new approach by drawing upon the theory of the counter-public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Negt & Kluge, 1993) to examine the struggle to democratize the communication and participation of excluded individuals and groups—what the previous chapter called “the communication have-nots”—in contemporary China. More specifically, by adopting the framework of the counter-public sphere, this chapter aims to provide a conceptual link between mobile-phone-facilitated collective resistance and popular protests and democratization in contemporary China. A decade ago, Ethan Gutmann (2002) argued that, instead of the intellectuals, “irate overtaxed peasants with Internet-enabled cell phones ten years from now are... key to bringing democracy to China.” Today, China tops the world’s biggest mobile phone powerhouse with over one billion subscribers, an average of around four out of every five people (Xinhua, 2012). Frequently, mobile media plays a vital role in proliferating censored information, organizing collective actions, energizing political participation, and increasing civic engagement. But how are we to understand Gutmann’s argument, or the growth of political participation and citizen engagement that mobile phones facilitate, or the potential of mobile phones to stimulate democratization in China? These questions entail discussion of the specific way in which the socio-political and cultural dynamics of Chinese society and

[mobile] media have intersected to structurally [re]shape democracy and have created specific patterns of access to, or exclusion from, power and participation.

I first offer a social historical analysis of the role of media in democratization in China by looking at how media shape the perception, advocacy, and practice of democracy. Second, I review and reflect on the literature on media and democratization in contemporary China. Third, I elaborate on the counter-public sphere theory as my theoretical framework to explore mobile-phone-facilitated dynamics and changes in struggles for democracy and political participation in contemporary China.

3.1 HISTORIZING MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN CHINA

The media have played a central role in both forming the very bedrock of the democratization of society and affecting the health of democratic societies. To be specific, theoretically, media not only inform citizens various social, political, and economical activities happening around the world, but also act as the voice for the poor and powerless and bring together different schools of thought, providing a forum for dialogue, argument, reconciliation, and deliberation (Lichtenberg, 1990; Chambers & Costain, 2000; Meyer & Hinchman, 2002; Dahlgren, 2009). Different media systems around the world produce not only diversified information environments that are distinct from each other but also various communication landscapes that are gigantic in significance (Peterson, Schramm, & Siebert, 1956; Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012). In this way, these different media systems shape democracy and the process of democratization into different forms in different societies depending on the social, political, and economic context (Lull, 2000; Hackett & Zhao, 2005; Aalberg &

Curran, 2012). Equally importantly, democracy, as Dahl (1998: 3) reminds us, “has meant different things to different people at different times and places.” The same statement applies to components of democracy. For instance, individualism, one of the core political and social values of democracy in Western philosophy, contains negative connotations in traditional Chinese thoughts, such as “*zisi*” (selfishness) and “*ziwo*” (self-centeredness) (Kamachi, 1978: 250). The collectivistic tradition in China advocates subordination of individual interests to a common (collective) interest; of minor interests to major ones. In other words, collectivism or “publicness” (*gong*) in the Chinese context excludes the very existence of individualism. Consequently, the idea of Western individualism, which implies an equality of interest, is not recognized by law, much less used to defend individual interests in China. Given this cultural difference, democracy must be contextualized and qualified. Therefore, the perceptions of democracy in Chinese society cannot be understood adequately by using a Western approach, which takes democracy for granted as something that promotes equality. Understanding the interplay between media and democracy against the socio-cultural background of China thus becomes the starting point for further discussions on media and democratization in contemporary China.

Given the specific socio-political and cultural characteristics of Chinese society, this section delineates how media influence not only perceptions of democracy but also the process of democratization in China. The socio-historical perspective that I suggest here serves as an essential baseline for appraising the progress of the media and democracy in China today. The first part briefly reviews media and *minzhu* (democracy) in ancient China. The second part examines from a critical perspective

the modern Chinese press from 1874¹ to 1949 and its advocacy for democratization. The third part critically assesses the media after 1949 and democratic experiments in contemporary China. The fourth part summarizes the relationship between media and democratization in China.

3.1.1 *Minzhu* and media as instruments for dictatorship in ancient China

By and large, the media in ancient China were under the imperial autocracy and published for the interest of the emperor.

The earliest press in China dates from the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) whereas *minzhu*, the closest Chinese translation of democracy, has a longer history prior to the Qin Dynasty (221 B.C. to 205 B.C.) (Lin, 1936; Fang, 1991). However, neither represented the meaning of democracy in a modern sense. Contrary to the Greek “*demokratia*,” which means “rule by the people” (Dahl, 1989: 3), the original meaning of *minzhu* in the context of China refers to the lord of the people, the emperor. The emperor held an absolutist control over state and society, including the printing press. Furthermore, through his bureaucratic system, the emperor had total control over the press. Accordingly, the printed documents served predominantly as tools of the ruler and his realm instead of as tools of the ruled. Imperial edicts and memorials to the throne dominated the printed word. Consequently, as a sort of government gazette, the media in ancient China were far removed from the role of a public press for the benefit of the general people. The people had no voice in either the press or the political process; democracy as a political concept and social practice never emerged in ancient China.

¹ The first modern-style Chinese-run press was *Wangguo Gongbao* (1874-1947, 万国公报, Universal Circulating Herald), founded by Wang Tao, “the father of Chinese journalists,” in February 5, 1874 (Lin, 1936: 79).

3.1.2 “*Wenren lun zheng*”: Elitism and modifications of Western-style democracy in the modern Chinese press

The introduction of the modern press from the Western world at the end of the 19th century freed the media from the imperial autocracy (Fang, 1991). Nevertheless, the modern Chinese press was still dominated by a tiny group of people—*wenren* (the literati)—because the ability to read and write was practically limited to the intellectual strata. Accordingly, under the control of Chinese literati who are keen on introducing the idea of democracy from the Western world, on the one hand, the modern press has exerted a profound influence on the introduction, indigenization, and popularization of Western-style democracy in China (Lin, 1968: 14; Fang, 1991; Jin & Liu, 2005: 471; Lee, 2008). On the other hand, given its place in history and, more importantly, intellectual elitism, the modern press largely limits people’s perceptions of democracy, leaving advocacy and practice of “democracy” still far away from “rule by the people” in modern China.

This dilemma is deeply rooted in, and demonstrated by, the practice of “*wenren lun zheng*”¹ (文人论政), a distinctive characteristic of the modern Chinese press. The Chinese phrase “*wenren lun zheng*” denotes that the literati or intellectuals pursue their roles as publicists to engage in public and political matters. In China, intellectuals have historically played an active role in their country’s political and social life: in particular, in salvaging their declining country and endangered nation at the end of the 19th century. More specifically, China suffered repeated defeats ceding territory and paying indemnity to Western invaders since the mid-19th-century opium

¹ Also see the statement from Zhang Jiluan, the chief editor of Chongqing-based *Ta Kung Pao* (TKP). When the University of Missouri honored TKP “Missouri Honor Medal Winners” in May 1941, Zhang Jiluan, then chief editor of TKP, stressed in the declaration of newspaper staff that: “Chinese newspapers are different from those in other countries in one way. That is, the newspapers in other countries are corporate enterprises whereas Chinese newspapers are basically about intellectuals and literati engaged in politics as opposed to being pure corporate enterprises. On this point, one can say that China is backwards, but this can also be said to be a unique Chinese characteristic” (Soong, 2006).

wars (in 1840-41 and 1860). These defeats and humiliations aggravated domestic turmoil, leaving both the country and its people struggling to survive. With an ardent desire to rescue and strengthen their beleaguered nation, numerous Chinese intellectuals, in particular the early modern liberals who had been abroad or received a Western-style education, increasingly regarded the modern press as an effective channel for ruler-and-ruled communication and national assembly, a pedagogical tool for popularization of Western ideas and mass enlightenment, and a crucial instrument for political expression and institutional reform¹ (Liang, 1896).

Penning thousands of editorials and commentaries that called for a modern outlook and reform of the political system for a “rich and strong” (*fuqiang*) state, Chinese literati believed that democracy, the source of the Western “wealth and power,” provided a clue to revitalizing China (Huang, 1972: 31; Nathan, 1986; Fung, 1991: 271). Historically speaking, as early as 1895, Western democratic ideas appeared in Chinese newspapers and later became a perennial subject of discussions (Huang, 1972: 20-21). The first republican government in 1912 highlighted Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s “*Sanmin Zhuyi*” (Three Principles of the People), including *minzu* (nationalism, or government of the people), *minquan* (democracy, or government by the people), and *minsheng* (the people’s livelihood, or government for the people). In 1915, the renowned *New Youth* (*xin qingnian*) journal advocated the paramount importance of “Mr. Democracy” (*De Xiansheng*) and “Mr. Science” (*Sai Xiansheng*) for China. These two ideas later became the major component of the New Culture Movement,

¹ For example, the late Qing’s reform-minded scholars, headed by Kang Youwei, a prominent advocate for constitutional monarchy, started running newspapers as the first and foremost way of political engagement, which led to the Hundred Days’ Reform of 1898 with the purpose of establishing a modern, constitutional government (Fang, 1991: 73). As “a brilliant scholar, journalist, and political figure” (Levenson, 1953: preface, vii), Liang Qichao related the modern press to national self-strengthening and valued that “the greater the number of newspaper readers, the higher the level of popular knowledge. The larger the number of newspapers, the stronger the nation” (Liang, 1896, 1904, cited from Judge [1996]: 22). Related discussions on Wang Tao, see Cohen (1987): 79-80; on Liang Qichao, see Huang (1972): 28; on Chen Qitian of Chinese Youth Party, see Chen (1966): 36, cited from Fung (1991): 269.

which calls for reshaping Chinese culture based on global and Western standards. Consequently, the practice of “*wenren lun zheng*,” with its huge political clout, played a vital role in the introduction and indigenization of the idea of Western-style democracy in China. This process further influenced the process of democratization in modern China from the following two aspects: misinterpretation of democracy as a means of making a “rich and strong” state and replacement of the idea of “rule by the people” by *kaimin zhuanzhi* (enlightened despotism).

First, to salvage the nation in peril and to free China from the domination of Western powers, modern Chinese literati “misinterpreted” democracy in a strategic way as a crucial means of moving towards a “rich and strong” state (Lee, 1990b: 10; Zhao, 2000: 5). More specifically, both the experiences of foreign invasion, political chaos, and revolutions that ensued from the mid 1830s to 1949 and the survival of war-torn China made the literati prioritize national salvation while downplaying the enlightenment movement of Western doctrines, including democracy and individualism (Schwarcz, 1986: 222; Nathan, 1986; Wong, 1993: 458). Even intellectuals who griped about people’s political authority and civil rights issues seemed to do so through a filter of sincere patriotism¹. Consequently, as Chang observes, “...there seems to have been a widespread tendency to appreciate democracy more as an indispensable functioning part of a modern nation-state than as an institution to protect individual rights and liberties” (Chang, 1971: 305-306). In other words, Chinese intellectuals grasped the dynamics of the modern press and saw how it could spread their perceptions of and call for “democracy” to redress China’s

¹ For example, Liang Qichao, who publicized people’s political authority in his early-stage work, “place[d] first priority on a strong state” (Huang, 1972: 77) at the cost of his liberal inclinations. Also see Chen Qitian, one of the China Youth Party leaders, who opined that “...democracy, once established, would safeguard against civil war, cope with national crises, effect good and open government that combines *fazhi* [the rule of law] with *renzhi* [rule by men], maintain social cooperation, and produce a synthesis of modern liberal thought and traditional Chinese values...” (Fung, 1991: 274).

humiliation at the hands of the West in the 19th and 20th centuries. Under the control of the literati and their media practices, the modern Chinese press promoted the fundamental misinterpretation of the idea of democracy in society as the arduous task of national salvation and “an effective means to national development” (Nathan, 1986; Ip, 1991: 470) instead of independence, human rights, and self-reliance characteristic of its original Western meaning.

Second, and more importantly, the elitism of the Chinese literati as media professionals disparaged popular democratic participation of the underprivileged majority in the political process. Rather, these literati advocated limiting the implementation of Western-style democracy within the ruling stratum and the educated class.

As we mentioned earlier, poor literacy rates greatly hampered both the use of textual information and the availability and accessibility of the press. To be specific, in a country where the illiteracy rate reached 85% (Zheng & Yu, 2008: 172), the modern Chinese press could only be read by and targeted to the urban intellectual elite, “the smallest number of a minority of the Chinese people” (Huang, 1972: 78). Therefore, when the modern press in Western countries became an instrument for mediating messages and facilitating public debates of different social agents, their counterparts in China still restricted themselves to the elite authors and audience of intellectuals¹, who represented an infinitesimal proportion in the total population (Harrison, 200). In the meantime, China’s long history of imperial rule and hierarchical order made it difficult for elitist-minded literati to understand the practice of “rule by the people.” Although placing high value on and trying to propagandize Western-style democracy,

¹ According to Liang Qichao, the most outstanding journals in China suffer from limited circulation of only several thousand or even less, in comparison to, for instance, the total readership of about 15 million in the same period in the United States by 1900 (Liang Qichao. *A Condensed Record of (My) Travels in the New World*, YPSCC 22: 53, cited from Huang [1972]: 78).

these intellectuals were bitterly disappointed in their illiteracy and semi-literacy Eastern compatriots. In other words, the reality of the majority as the illiterate and semi-literate convinced intellectual elitists that democracy had to be tightly controlled and channeled by officialdom and the educated in order for China to maintain itself as a unified country. Yet these intellectuals believed that the pursuit of egalitarian principles would ultimately lead to a breakdown of social order, and democracy, which entails “rule by the people,” would without doubt plunge China into pandemonium and lead to the dictatorship of popularly elected rulers (Zhu, 1906; Liang, 1906; Ip, 1991: 475-476; Jin & Liu, 2005: 476). Therefore, these intellectuals concluded that the majority of the uneducated and less-educated population should be discouraged from participating in political activities.

Bearing this in mind, Chinese literati elitists turned against the Western idea of democracy, “rule by the people,” and scorned popular political participation¹. Dominated by these intellectual elitists, accordingly, printed texts after 1898 frequently argued that the breakdown or exclusion of the autocratic government did not always mean the revivification of China (Lee, 1990b: 10; Jin & Liu, 2005). Along with this shift in view poured in the request for *kaimin zhuanzhi* (enlightened despotism/enlightened dictatorship), a totally different perception of democracy², in

¹ For instance, Liang Qichao cried out in *Xinmin Congbao* (New People’s Miscellany) that the majority of Chinese people were “still uneducated and uncultured” and “simply not ready for democracy” (Huang, 1972: 79). The editorial in Tianjin-based *Yishi Bao*, one of the top four newspapers in the Republic of China (ROC), described the status quo of Chinese people as “millions of blockheads, without one modern citizen” (my translation, see Editorial [1936], cited from Zheng & Yu [2008]: 172. Chen Duxiu, a leading figure in the May Fourth Movement for science and democracy and co-founder of the CPC, criticized Chinese people “without knowledge, capability and responsibility,” lamenting that “...the idea of popular political participation is a useless remark; majority political participation is an idiotic idea in China at this time” (my translation) (Chen, 1987: 618).

² For example, Liang Qichao claimed that China should be ruled by enlightened autocrats, and the notion “enlightened despotism” consists of both the autocracy of the “load of the people” and the autocracy resulting from democracy (Liang, 1906; Jin & Liu, 2005: 476). A large number of liberal Chinese intellectuals, including those sticking to the Western notion of democracy, such as Huang Zunxian (a diplomat who worked in Japan, the United States, England, and Singapore), Weng Wenhao (studied in Belgium), Ding Wenjiang (studied in Britain) and Qian Duansheng (studied at Harvard University, USA), also rallied to their defense with eloquent essays in support of an autocratic

the modern press. Most important, to ensure their elite and protagonist role in the process of democratization, Chinese literati introduced a Western representative system framed by the public sphere of the elite as the educated to foster qualification for citizenship (Jin & Liu, 2005: 483). Instead of speaking up for concerns on a grassroots level, intellectual elites and officialdom comprised the representative political system to enlighten and govern the masses deemed unqualified for democracy, maintaining hierarchical human relationships as essential for the survival and development of the Chinese nation (Kelliher, 1993: 384-386).

In this way, the indigenization, advocacy, and implementation of Western-style democracy to a culturally unique China underwent a “selective reconstruction process” (Jin & Liu, 2005: 467-501) rather than the emulation of that instituted in Western countries. This process is closely identified with the modern Chinese press and, in fact, Chinese intellectuals as media professionals. Based on collections of essays and publications on politics and modern periodicals between 1840 and 1925, Jin and Liu demonstrate this dramatic transformation of modern Chinese perceptions of “democracy” from neutral to negative usages (Jin & Liu, 2005). To examine it more closely, the connotation of democracy started from a popularly selected ruler, a political system opposed to hereditary monarchy, and “people’s sovereignty” and “rule by the people” after the introduction of the “Western concepts” of democracy in the late 19th century. Next, however, the meaning of democracy evolved to democratic dictatorship, enlightened despotism, and democracy-republicanism (*minzhu gonghe*) in the early 20th-century, which was based on an elite-dominated representative policy-making process with “a hierarchical inequality and a resistance to popular participation” (Jin & Liu, 2005: 483). Speaking highly of and claiming to embrace

government, arguing that China needed a strong dictator-like leader and related government as a mainstay to lend the country to development and prosperity (Chen, 2008).

Western-style democracy in the beginning, ironically, modern Chinese literati spurned the use of *minzhu* for popular democratic participation in their commentaries and essays, abandoning the idea of “rule by people” in the end.

To summarize, due to the extremely low literacy rate in modern Chinese society, few people had access to printed texts, much less the idea of democracy in a Western context. Therefore, the literati, as the only group that is able to read and write, played a key role in the introduction, reconfiguration, indigenization, and popularization of Western-style democracy in modern China. Taking advantage of the modern Chinese press, these literati as media professionals not only shaped the idea of democracy in Chinese society, but also exerted a further impact on the process of democratization in modern China.

On the one hand, these intellectuals misread Western democracy as a means of strengthening their country by ignoring democracy’s two core values—individualism and egalitarianism. Accordingly, instead of guaranteeing individual rights and political autonomy, the modern Chinese press usually flared up with the advocacy of democracy to mobilize mass enthusiasm and initiated widespread nationalism when China was on the verge of foreign conquest¹. Here, the perception of democracy in the modern Chinese media went too far beyond its Western counterpart.

On the other hand, with the political aim of mass enlightenment of democracy, the elitism of the Chinese literati shaped and promulgated various depictions of *minzhu* counter to the Western idea of “rule by the people.” When the modernizing elite who dominated the newspapers—either reform-minded or revolutionary-minded democrats who once gushed about the majesty of democracy—finally dismissed the idea of “rule

¹ For example, invigorated by patriotism after China’s defeat in the Sino-Japan War, the “golden period” of the modern Chinese press from 1895 to 1911 catalyzed the 1911 Revolution, which eventually overthrew the Manchu regime. Following the failure of the Chinese Republic founded in 1912, great growth of Chinese periodicals during the New Cultural Movement of the mid 1910s and 1920s produced the seedbeds for revolutionary leaders and communism in China.

by the people,” they decried that the uneducated, irrational masses that were accustomed to an authoritarian state had absolutely no understanding of democracy and offering them political leverage would only jeopardize the nation. Consequently, the practice of “*wenren lun zheng*” introduced a *de facto* representative public sphere in modern China while arguing against the idea of “the people are the ruler” (Jin & Liu, 2005: 477). Most importantly, voluntarily adhering to the ruler, intellectuals conceived media to be a vehicle for supporting the elitist perspective of government—which dictates public policy that favors their (intellectuals’) own interests—instead of as a democratic instrument for majority participation in decisions. For the majority of illiterate and semi-illiterate people in China, the modern press is, again, neither a tool for voicing their opinions nor an instrument for defending their rights.

Furthermore, without emancipating the legions of the unprivileged majority from an oppressive social and political system, the elitist mentality isolates Chinese intellectuals and their commentaries from the mass and makes it impossible for Chinese publicists to familiarize themselves with and respond to popular demand. Eventually, the stunted growth of representative democracy with weak connections to the masses lost its battle with “*renmin minzhu zhuanzheng*” (the democratic dictatorship of the people), a class-based claim to democracy invented by CPC (Mao, 1949; MacFarquhar, Fairbank, & Twitchett, 1991: 6). The elitism of “*wenren lunzheng*” has been accordingly replaced by the media functioning in principle as “the mouthpiece” (*houshe*, throat and tongue) of both the party and the people after 1949.

3.1.3 The party-controlled media and poor democracy in contemporary China

The media continue to play a critical role in both the discourse on democracy and the process of democratization in China after 1949. For one thing, as the dominant

political force in contemporary Chinese society, the party seeks to maintain its leading role by investing heavily in mechanisms, however changeable, to control and manipulate the media, including mass media and the internet. For another, other social forces struggle to voice their desire for democracy, particularly with the help of ICT. Nevertheless, the concentration of media resources within a relatively small population—either the party or well-educated urban dwellers—still greatly discourages political participation of the majority and hinders the process of democratization in contemporary China. I briefly characterize the role of media in the process of democratization in contemporary China in the following paragraphs.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the party adopted what it called "people's democratic dictatorship," which combines democracy among the people with dictatorship over the enemy as the basic principles for democratic political life. However, the actual practice of "people's democratic dictatorship" is by no means a thriving democracy, which would promote autonomous political participation from all citizens. In reality, the "people" (*renmin*) remained being seen as "...incapable of articulating their long-term interests" (Zhao, 2001: 24) during the Maoist regime. By using media as the key instrument, the party not only collected people's concerns, sufferings, opinions, and interests through a bottom-up process, but also mobilized them to carry out the policies that the party makes, by principle, in the general interest of the people (Lee, 1990b). Against this backdrop, the party exerted tight control over media outlets, restricting not only their numbers but also their content, length, and format (Lee, 2000). Consequently, media served exclusively for the party as an information-collection agency, a propaganda machine, and a mobilization instrument. In addition, the party determined who should be entitled to the rights to communication (Lee, 1990b: 8). Therefore, as Zhao observes, "...there is

no concept of the people's right to know... Nor is there a notion of an informed citizenry participating directly in policy formation" (Zhao, 2001: 24). In short, dictated by the party, media never functioned as a public service to keep people better informed or to expand grassroots political participation under the Maoist regime.

As China embarked on economic reform in the late 1970s, the nation witnessed a huge rise in popular political consciousness. Benefitting a great deal from the party's unprecedented relaxing of the political environment¹, media actively engaged in discussions of political and ideological issues, in particular advocacies for openness, liberalization, and democratization during the 1978-1979 Democracy Wall movement and the 1989 student movement. Although democracy meant different things during these two crucial popular struggles—and each was qualitatively different in its essence from the other²—the call for democratization of communication media as the prerequisite for and an integral part of democracy in Chinese society flourished as a general consensus among activists no matter what their point of view on democracy was. For instance, the Democracy Wall activists advocated an independent press separate from the control of the party as essential to the democratization of Chinese politics (Nathan, 1986: 192). The activists, journalists, and media theorists at Tiananmen in 1989 pursued freedom of the press, "...which in fact suggested that the press should be free from the arbitrary power of the Party" (Zhao, 1998: 36). In addition, in 1989 the emerging discourse on the democratization of media and communication consisted of "[t]he crusade for press freedom, the articulation of the

¹ For instance, the debates about democracy around 1979 under Deng Xiaoping's encouragement, see Nathan (1986).

² More specifically, during the 1978-1979 Democracy Wall movement, democracy was "a popular and inclusive notion" and had been defined "in participatory terms, including intellectuals, workers, and peasants" (Zhao, 2001: 27). During the 1989 student movement, by contrast, democracy was "an elitist and liberal notion," and the student activists tried to "keep democracy safe from the masses" (Kelliher, 1993), because they—peasants and workers—were "neither ready nor suitable for democracy" (Zhao, 2001: 28-29).

people principle¹, the construction of journalism laws, and the call for independent newspapers” (Zhao, 1998: 41). This discourse not only radically challenged the party’s absolute leadership over the media, but also “...desired a more independent public sphere, where different interests could be better communicated and through which the public could exercise some control over the Party and the government” (Zhao, 1998: 41). Therefore, the role of media in China was, as Hong (2002) sums up, “a catalyst for democratisation and a promoter of democratic consciousness,” both of which endangered the party’s ruling position and weakened the Communist ideology and system in the 1980s.

The repression of the student movement in 1989 marked the end of an era not only for the pro-democracy movement, but also for the democratization of media in society. After learning the lessons from Tiananmen—in particular, the ideological dispute and political disruption that were caused by democratization of the media and communication—the party realized that media control was central to its power and legitimacy. Immediately, the party imposed unprecedented limitations on the media to restore order in post-1989 China², such as the principle of “positive reporting having first place” (正面报道为主) (Li, 1990), the requirement of media as a vehicle “one hundred percent loyal” to the party, its political course and central tasks (Sun, 1992), and the enforcement of the post-publication review (审读) system to monitor media content (Chen, 2009). By the same token, by using the media, the party spun its own version of history, asserting that a direct democracy advocated in these movements

¹ “The people’s principle” called for a freer press dedicated to the people’s democratic rights. During the 1989 student movement, several high-ranking members, including Zhao Ziyang, then the General Secretary of the CPC, and Hu Jiwei, then the editor-in-chief of the *People’s Daily*, put forward this idea to advocate freedom of the press for all people as part of their democratic rights, see Zhao (1998: 37-38).

² For instance, after crushing the Tiananmen Square protest, Jiang Zeming and Li Ruihuan, both coming to power in the wake of the protests, re-interpreted policy so that the press should obey the Party principle above all, see Jiang (1990), Li (1990).

would lead to chaos and even civil war because Chinese people are uneducated and still ill-prepared for democracy. Therefore, only one-party (i.e., the CPC) rule and a totalitarian political system would work for China (Hong, 2002; Pan, 2008: 4). Again, communication via media was dominated by the party, the political participation of the majority was suppressed, and the process of democratization was stifled in China.

Since the early 1990s, commercialization has driven the development of Chinese media systems into a new period. To a certain extent, the media are becoming more autonomous and diverse, resulting in more investigative, critical, and aggressive reports on a wider variety of topics that would have been prohibited decades ago (He, 2000; Keane, 2001; Burgh, 2003; Pan, 2008). Nevertheless, as several studies reveal, the combination of continued ideological control and profit-driven commercialization discourse fail to pull media towards a democratization orientation, or to create a public sphere empowered with political authority (e.g., Lee, 1990a, 2000, 2003; Zhao, 1998, 2009; the next section will provide a detailed review of studies on contemporary Chinese media). Instead, the control over media continued to ensure that media would function as the pivotal means of legitimating the party's dominance and generalizing the party's particular interest to the universal interest (Lee, 2002; Dickson, 2003; Lee, et al., 2006; Lee, He, & Huang, 2007; He, 2008). In addition, toeing the party's line, the media-mediated public sphere enhanced the discourse of the interlocking of party control and market forces by depriving other disenfranchised groups (especially the poor and the weak) of their media voices (Zhao, 2001, 2009; Lee, 2003).

Without doubt, the rapid development of ICTs, in particular the internet, has had profound effects on the process of democratization in contemporary China. The current struggle for democracy in Chinese society is replete with examples of how

new media have assisted political movements, generated “online activism” (Yang, 2009), and nurtured a cyber civil society (Yang, 2003b, 2003a; Tai, 2006; Yang, 2007) to empower political participation by ordinary citizens on the one hand, and to change, and even undermine the authoritarian regime on the other hand (Zheng, 2008). Nevertheless, we should never forget the following two challenges at least until now: first and foremost, the party still dominates the online sphere; if necessary, it even has the capability to reverse online opinion overnight in its favor (Shirk, 2011: 4). Second, young and well-educated city dwellers comprise the majority of internet users in contemporary China. In other words, the voice from the “grassroots” remains distanced from the online sphere.

In summary, the media landscape of contemporary China has changed dramatically in recent decades. Nevertheless, still the foremost authority in contemporary China, the ruling CPC continues to be successful in compelling the media to be loyal to its dominance. After the commercialization of the media sector, the market-driven strategy in fact magnifies commercial greed while sidelining the interest of the poor and powerless in society. The voice of the majority has continued to be suppressed or marginalized by the interlocking of political manipulation (from the party) and commercial logic (from party-supported capitalism, or state capitalism). Consequently, “media commercialization with Chinese characteristics” (Zhao, 1998: 52) fails to advance the political freedom of ordinary citizens and the process of democratization in both the media and society. In recent years, citizens’ enthusiasm for new ICTs and their potential to enhance civic discourse and to improve the democratization process is boosting internet use, generating further—but more complex—discussions on media and democracy.

3.1.4 Approaching the question of media and democracy in China: Continuity, change, and conflict

A socio-historical review has identified three aspects relevant to the media's role in China's democratization: (a) the *continuity* of the crucial role of the media in fostering the perception of democracy in society; (b) the *changes* in the dominant mechanism of control over the media and in strategies against democratization of media and society; and (c) the emerging *conflict* between the dominant and the oppressed who are in pursuit of democratization in both media and society. Below, I elaborate on each of these points.

First, the media continues to play a relevant role in shaping perceptions of democracy in Chinese society as it has throughout history. Specifically, the definition of democracy remains “elusive” (Guang, 1996; Zhao, 2001) in the context of China. Accordingly, the answers to the questions “What is the meaning of democracy?” or “What does democracy mean in China?” are always open-ended and evolving, generating continuous debate and struggles. During this process, the media as an effective means of disseminating and popularizing ideas has played a vital role not only in advocating and debating various perceptions of democracy, but also in building up a hegemonic discourse on democracy and shaping the process of democratization in society.

More specifically, for one, the media is always in the forefront of any campaign for popularizing or arguing against ideas about democracy, or facilitating discussions and encouraging reflection on democracy in Chinese society. For instance, the literati made use of the modern press to publicize representative democracy (i.e., of the elite model), thereby influencing public opinion and politics in modern China. After it took power in mainland China, the CPC also gave the media important functions such as

propagandizing “socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics” under the CPC’s leadership while arguing against liberal democracy, which is usually regarded as Western democracy or capitalist democracy. The pro-democracy struggles in the 1970s and 1980s used various forms of media—the big character posters (大字报) and the unregistered journals from the 1978-1979 Democracy Wall movement as well as official mass media and newly established “people’s publications” (semi-official and non-official media outlets) during the 1989 student movement—to advocate their different understandings of democracy and views on China’s democratic development (Goldman, 1994; Zhao, 2001)¹. In short, the media *cannot not* influence public perceptions of democracy, which in turn shape the practice of democratization in China.

For another, due to the impact of media on democracy, the democratization of the media itself is an essential part of democracy in China. The call for democratizing the media—particularly freeing media from the party’s control—becomes more obvious after the 1980s. Control of the media or even manipulation of media greatly hinders the democratization process in Chinese society. An undemocratic system of media not only creates an information imbalance between different demographic groups (e.g., the intelligentsia and the peasantry in modern China) or between the citizen and the state (e.g., the majority and the party-state in contemporary China). More importantly, this undemocratic system generates an expression imbalance. Certain voices are suppressed or subjugated by those who dominate or control the media; accordingly, certain interests are sacrificed or ignored. Consequently, the undemocratic system of media reproduces and further legitimizes the undemocratic social order. In addition, for Chinese people, [democratic] access to the media is not simply a right (like

¹ For instance, the cases of the *World Economic Herald* (*Shijie Jingji Baodao*), see Hsiao (1990).

freedom of speech); it also requires certain capabilities rooted in basic literacy. In practice, China has always had a huge imbalance of literacy, which has contributed to unequal media access and use. Therefore, although democratization is the key issue in the media system, media democratization means more than just breaking the monopoly of, for instance, the intelligentsia or the party over media in China. Instead, the democratization of communication media denotes a media system that speaks with a plurality of voices, particularly those of the poor and powerless.

Second, because of the relevant role of the media in democracy, the controls over the media do not have fluctuations only within themselves; they change based on context. Likewise, strategies that have been adopted in order to harness the media to influence the process of democratization also change. Put otherwise, throughout history, *various* strategic methods have been deployed (a) to prevent democratizing [access to] the media or (b) to exploit media as means of precluding democratization in society. For instance, during the modern period, the intellectual elite worried that democratization would bring about the breakdown of hierarchy, which would consequently endanger their own class privileges. Consequently, in the modern press, these intellectuals asserted that democracy would only bring chaos and destruction to the country. The representative “democracy” they advocated thus rejected popular participation in politics. Similarly, taking advantage of media as its propaganda machine, the party’s leaders claimed that China was simply too big, too unique, and far too prone to chaos for them (leadership) to allow democracy. As a result, although “the democratic dictatorship of the people,” by principle, indicates the status of the Chinese people as masters in the country’s political life, the party, as “the vanguard both of the Chinese working class and of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation” (Xinhua, 2007), virtually controls every aspect of the country’s political life. Moreover, the fear of loss

of power caused the party to seek near-total, (however changeable) control to prevent democratization in both media and society in contemporary China. In terms of the media, for instance, control has varied from direct propaganda to subtle commercial manipulation and self-censorship (He, 2008). As Hong (2002) summarizes, “the changeable role and function of the media in democratisation vividly reflected the changeable policies of the Chinese Communist Party.” Those whose own interests would be best protected by opposing democracy normally seek every way possible to sabotage the process of democratization in media and society in China. Nevertheless, the goal of change is to maintain one’s privileged position (e.g., the intellectual or the party) in society by making previous control strategies more adaptable to the current situation rather than rejecting these strategies.

Third, both media and their communication sphere are increasingly becoming a major place where the incessant struggles for democracy take place, especially in light of the proliferation of new ICTs in contemporary China. In the past, this sphere was used to promulgate a compulsory consensus for those individuals or groups that had control over the media in order to denigrate and slander the voiceless and powerless. However, as channels for communication grow and diversify (e.g., alternative media), this sphere gradually turns into a forum for articulating criticism, triggering resistance, and advocating democracy in its Western sense in society. Therefore, the dynamics of democracy today are closely associated with conflict and struggle within the sphere of communication media in China.

These three aspects demonstrate the specific and relevant role of media in the democratization process in Chinese society. Therefore, the questions about how to promote democracy in China can be boiled down to: Is it possible—and, if so, how—to set up a (more) democratic media system in Chinese society to quash, undermine,

or challenge the party's control and monopoly over the media, or to abolish inequality in access to media, and further achieve or promote democratic engagement in media and society? The current literature on media and democracy in contemporary China sheds some light on this question.

3.2 MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA:

Literature review and reflections

Research on media and democracy in contemporary China covers a wide range of topics, including changes in media policy and governance, reconfigurations in the media system and organization, and challenges from new information and communication technologies. Generally speaking, there are three major approaches to media and democratization in contemporary China.

First, of numerous studies on structural changes in the media sector and their influences on democratization in contemporary China, the relationship between marketization (and later commercialization) and democratization is without doubt one of the hottest topics after the media in China plunged into commercialization (e.g., Zhao, 1998, 2009; Lee, 2002). The experience of the market mechanism and its promotion and protection of media pluralism and independence from the Western context (and the United States in particular) generates new hope of loosening party control over the media, nurturing the watchdog role of the press, and speeding up the democratization process in media and society in the long run. However, as several studies have shown, commercialization fails to promote democratization even within the media system, let alone society. In particular, as Zhao argues in her two volumes of critical study on the political economy of the Chinese media, the dominance of a

neoliberal market rationality in the media sector deteriorates the status of the poor and powerless by suppressing and marginalizing their voices in the mass-mediated public sphere (Zhao, 1998, 2009). In other words, under the commercial logic, basic access to the [mass] media has been “very unequal” (Zhao, 1998: 192). Attracted by the appeal of capital, contemporary Chinese media move far away from the moneyless and powerless instead of functioning as a bargaining body for those “vulnerable” individuals and communities (Liu, 1998; Zhao, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2009). Media commercialization results in the neglect of the perspectives of poor rural and urban working-class populations and inadequate coverage about and for low-income groups (Zhao, 1998: 184). Consequently, the current media system fails to serve as a communication system that is open and accessible to all citizens.

Second, the mechanism of ideological control and political manipulation over the media is the biggest obstacle for democratization in contemporary China. Although taking the same critical view of the role of media in the democratic process as those who lament that commercialization fails to produce democracy in contemporary China, some scholars suggest that, instead of profit-driven commercialization, the party’s political dominance over the media remains the major obstacle towards democratization of communication and society (Lee, 2000, 2001). On the one hand, the party’s ideological control over the media has continued unchanged. In practice, the party’s control thus remains “the most important obstacle to democratization of communication” (Zhao, 1998: 9). On the other hand, as the dominant agent in the commercialization process, the party takes advantage of the force of the market in shaping the function of the media. As Lee points out, “China’s market is structurally embedded in and intertwined with—rather than separate from—the state’ policy, while the marketised media do not oppose the ideological premises of the party-state”

(Lee, 2001: 88). Therefore, Lee emphasizes that, instead of “capitalist development,” “the repressive state” is the first enemy of democracy in China (Lee, 2000, 2001).

Furthermore, through the adoption of market-based mechanisms, the regime successfully transforms the media from being ideological brainwashers to being “profit-making propaganda units” (Lee, et al., 2007: 24) or “Party Publicity Inc.” (He, 2000: 143; Lee, et al., 2006). Instead of questioning party legitimacy or attacking ranking officials, the media “...publicize the Party’s policies, legitimize its mandate to rule, and contribute to the establishment of cultural and ideological hegemony” (He, 2000: 143). In short, the authoritarian-like media system, under which the media have been granted some autonomy and freedom by the party as long as they do not threaten the party’s grip on power, consolidate the party’s ruling status, discourage opposition, and quell political participation in contemporary China.

Third, the emergence of new ICTs nurtures new forms of civic engagement and nourishes changes in political participation. However, there is no easy answer to the question of whether new ICTs, especially the internet, will bring democracy to authoritarian China. On the one hand, some studies suggest that the internet has increasingly become a vital access point into government bureaucracies and public policy-building processes, facilitating online activism, enlivening cyber civil society, and constituting the virtual public sphere (e.g., Yang, 2003a; Augus, 2007; Yang, 2007; Zheng, 2008; Yang, 2009; Zhu & Cheng, 2011). On the other hand, others hold the opposite opinion, arguing that the party-state also modernizes itself with the control strategies that rein in the internet to defend its autocratic rule effectively (He, 2006; Goldsmith & Wu, 2006: 91; Weber & Lu, 2007; Morozov, 2011). It is equally critical to realize that commercialization has transformed the internet into a more

diversified and market-driven profile¹. Those who are using this digital tool to find accurate information or engage in online discussions might not be fully aware when they encounter information that has been manipulated by, for instance, government-supported *wumao dang*² or so-called “internet water army” (网络水军), posters paid by companies.

Most importantly, the demographics of internet users mirror and bolster the socioeconomic divide in society. Although the “working-class network society” (Qiu, 2009) is emerging because of the availability of low-end ICT devices, technological barriers remain as a major obstacle for intellectually, socially, and economically vulnerable individuals and groups to let their own voices be heard or to join online public debates, let alone to impact policies that are deeply linked to their lives or interests (Harwit, 2004). For instance, in his study on the contentious online activism in contemporary China, Yang realizes that “...the participants in online activism are mostly urban residents and that many, perhaps the majority, are young people” (Yang, 2009: 32). Consequently, the cyber public sphere in China, still in its infancy, is currently facing technological and demographic limitations. In addition to the lack of adequate telecommunication infrastructure and sustainable financial means for internet technology in rural China, as Zhao, Hao, and Banerjee’s research (2006) pinpoints, Chinese farmers are neither interested in adopting the internet nor financially able to do so, which impedes expansion of the internet to this group. More precisely, “the adoption of the internet in China’s rural west does not rest with the will

¹ 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 its search engine (Fauna, 2008b, 2008a). Many internet promotion companies hire hundreds or even thousands of temporary internet users to post premeditated comments on various online forums to “do practically anything that they want with respect to manipulating public opinion” (“Economic 30 Minutes”, 2009). Concerning discussions in online communities, Lü Benfu, an internet economist from Chinese Academy of Science, regards that “at least half of the hot topics are planned by someone.” For a report on the “internet triad organization” (网络黑社会) and “internet promotion companies,” see “Economic 30 Minutes” (2009).

² See the discussion on *wumao dang* in the previous chapter.

of individual farmers, who have neither the financial means nor the immediate needs to drive them to the internet” (Zhao et al., 2006: 302). Therefore, simply “offering” access to the internet by extending the wired infrastructure into rural China, which occurs as a result of either government initiatives or private investments, does not accomplish the task of getting users to try it, let alone change the process of democratic participation or empower the resistance of the rural population, which faces the additional barrier of low literacy rates.

In summary, many recent studies on media and democracy in contemporary China revolve around either the change (e.g., suppression, impediment, and erosion) of the dominant political force, or the ongoing commercialization process in the media sector, or the struggle of technologically empowered citizens, most of whom come from the urban middle class. As these studies demonstrate, in reality, the authoritarian media system not only leaves the general public highly disaffected with the mass-mediated public sphere, but also distances ordinary citizens from the political process. As a result, democratic engagement from citizens is impeded while the public sphere is limited to elite and official political voices, with ordinary citizens and organizations being left out of or sidelined from public discourses.

Meanwhile, explicitly or implicitly, these studies recognize that there are still [large] groups of people (e.g., peasants and urban workers) whose voices have been excluded from either mass media or the internet. Nevertheless, these studies often ignore the concerns of these people. In particular, although most of this scholarship deploys Habermas’s framework of the “public sphere” (e.g. Yang, 2003b, 2003a; Latham, 2007; Yang, 2009; Zhao, 2009), few studies explore how counter-publics (i.e., those suppressed or marginalized individuals and groups in the public sphere or “the communication have-nots” in this study) appropriate their available communication

resources to build their own unique infrastructures for opinion formation and expression, thereby further enhancing their political participation, representation, and influence in the dominant public sphere. To fill that gap, I introduce in the next section the concept of the counter-public sphere and employ it as an analytical framework for accounting for the communication have-nots, their struggles for their rights to communication and participation, and the implications for democratization in China.

3.3 MOBILE COMMUNICATION, THE COUNTER-PUBLIC SPHERE, AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN CHINA

3.3.1 A theoretical approach to a “counter-public sphere”

The concept of counter-public sphere is based on a critique of the Habermasian public sphere. To be clear, Habermas formulates his ideal-type conception of the [bourgeois] public sphere as both an arena that in principle is open to all citizens for rational-critical discussions and debates on matters of public importance and an institutional mechanism for those discussions and debates to influence the decision-making process and to make the state accountable to the citizenry (Habermas, 1989, 1992). 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 from those in marginalized, isolated, or ignored groups (Habermas, 1974: 49; Curran & Gurevitch, 1991: 103; Calhoun, 1992: Chapter 12).

However, as several studies and the previous chapters argue, the significant exclusions from the bourgeois public sphere contrast with Habermas's assertions concerning a disregard for status and a regard for inclusivity in the public sphere (Calhoun, 1992). Instead, the public sphere legitimates the interest of the White, male bourgeois class as the universal interest while sacrificing the interests of others (e.g., women and working class) by suppressing or marginalizing their voices systematically in the dominant system. Complementarily, scholars introduce the concept of the "counter-public sphere" to identify the space where these marginalized and excluded individuals or groups contest, negotiate, or mobilize to speak in their own voice, to struggle against the hegemonic discourse, and to form new identities (Fraser, 1990; Negt & Kluge, 1993). The importance of the counter-public sphere lies in its capability to diversify the voices in the public sphere, to widen discursive space and contestation, and to facilitate participatory democracy and communication (Fraser, 1990: 67; Herbst, 1994; The Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Squires, 2002).

In a very small number of studies on the counter-public sphere (relative to the large amount of research on the public sphere), scholars have taken an interest in two different perspectives. The first perspective, usually associated with the work of Nancy Fraser (1990), addresses the contested discursive spaces of alternative media and their validity in democratic communications outside the dominant public sphere. The second perspective, based on Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's (1993) notion of a proletarian (counter-)public sphere, remains a valuable but under-explored work. It is largely due to the fact that Negt and Kluge's work, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung*.

Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit (“*Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*” in English), originally published in German in 1972, was not translated into English until 1993. As I see it, a combination of these two perspectives (adding, in particular, Negt and Kluge’s emphasis on the public sphere and “social horizon of experience”) helps deepen our understanding of the counter-public sphere. In the following, I briefly present some of Negt and Kluge’s theoretical claims about the counter-public sphere.

As both “a socialist critique and a radicalization of Habermas’s approach” (Fuchs, 2010: 176), Negt and Kluge differentiate multiple (at least three) types of public spheres that overlap and often contradict each other: the classic bourgeois public sphere, the public spheres of production without critical impulse, and the proletarian (counter-)public sphere (Negt & Kluge, 1993: 9-18).

In particular, Negt and Kluge emphasize the proletarian (counter-)public sphere as “**the working-class’s defense organization**” in bourgeois society [emphasis in original] (Negt & Kluge, 1993: 9-18). This proletarian public sphere functions “to protect individuals from the direct influence of bourgeois interests and ideologies” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: 61) on the one hand, and ideologically competes with the bourgeois public sphere from the excluded and unarticulated impulses of resistance or resentment on the other. In other words, operating outside the usual parameters of institutional legitimation, these officially unrecognized public spheres respond to the contingent needs of all of those groups whose [self-]expression has been excluded or, as Negt and Kluge put it, “blocked” from the usual arenas of [bourgeois] public discourse.

Most importantly, the proletarian (counter-)public sphere is grounded in the actual life experience of *the working class and others* normally excluded from the bourgeois public sphere. As Hansen stresses in the foreword, Negt and Kluge (1993) critique the universality of Habermas' public sphere from the "social horizon of experience" (Negt & Kluge, 1993: x) and the context of lived perspective. Here, the notion of "experience" (*Erfahrung*), as Hansen clarifies, should be seen as "...the matrix that mediates individual perception and social horizons of meaning, including the collective experience of alienation, isolation, and privatization" (Negt & Kluge, 1993: xviii). In this way, the proletarian (counter-)public sphere "reflects the interests and experiences of the overwhelming majority of the population" (Weisser, 2002: 78). Therefore, in short, the proletarian (counter-)public sphere would serve a greater purpose in furthering oppressed public opinion than a hegemonic public sphere or a re-feudalized mass media-mediated sphere that fragments the public by isolating them in individual private spaces where they continue to be mere recipients of entertainment-heavy mass communication, devoid of an opportunity for interpersonal communication or rational discussion. Furthermore, the potential of a proletarian (counter-)public sphere for emancipation and resistance underlies its power of generalization and unification of the collective experiences of the working class and other excluded groups and further organizing of their needs into politically relevant forms of consciousness and activity (Knödler-Bunte, 1975; Fuchs, 2010: 176).

3.3.2 Media and the right to communication: A key to the counter-public sphere

If the proletarian (counter-)public sphere raises resistance against the bourgeois public sphere, then communicative behaviors that revolve around the struggle for the right to communication play a key part in fighting against bourgeois hegemony/oppression

and in forming the proletarian (counter-)public sphere. More specifically, as Hansen emphasizes, the constitution of the proletarian (counter-)public sphere is inseparable from the question of “how social experience is articulated and becomes relevant—in other words, by which mechanism and media, in whose interest, and to what effect a ‘social horizon of experience’ is constituted” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: x). For instance, by analyzing the rudimentary form of the proletarian public sphere in the English Labor Movement (1792-1848), Negt and Kluge highlight the central relevance of both the right to communication and independent communication media in countering the bourgeois public sphere (Negt & Kluge, 1993: 187-200). On the one hand, the English working class “initially fight above all to consolidate autonomous structures of communication,” “which [are] independent of bourgeois’ forms of the public sphere and of state regimentation” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: 187-188). According to Michael Vester,

...[f]or only intensive, continuous, and broad communication realized in their (the English working class) own press, educational, protective, and action organizations sufficiently made possible the articulation, exchange, examination, and further development of views.

(Michael Vester, *Die Entstehung des Proletariats als Lernprozeß* [Frankfurt am Main, 1971], pp. 21f, cited from Negt & Kluge [1993]: 188)

Similarly, Bennett and Entman also agree about the relevance of access to communication to democracy:

Access to communication is one of the key measures of power and equality in modern democracies...Communication can shape power and participation in society in negative ways, by obscuring the motives and interests behind political decisions, or in positive ways, by promoting the involvement of citizens in those decisions.

(Bennett & Entman, 2001: 2)

On the other hand, the defeat of the English labor movement resulted in, among other things, “the fracturing of a public network of communication under proletarian control. This [gave] rise to a specific obstacle to the development of workers’ interests” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: 199).

Most importantly, the ideology of the working class matured “as a consequence of the struggle for communication rights,” which “...valued especially highly the freedoms of press, speech, assembly, and the individual” (Michael Vester, pp. 300ff, cited from Negt & Kluge [1993]: 191). Therefore, the right to communication functioned as “*a central object* of conflict between the establishment and the workers’ movement” (emphasis added, cited from Negt & Kluge [1993]: 188).

In sum, while most research on the counter-public sphere directs attention to resistance from the counter-public[s] outside the public sphere, Negt and Kluge’s argument focuses on the right to communication for not only the working class but also the majority of people in society. This right guarantees access to communication, which articulates some citizens’ lived experiences of social and political exclusion. Additionally, this right ensures an independent communication sphere for counter-public[s] beyond the dominant public sphere, thus creating new means of participation and providing possibilities for democratization. In this way, as Enzensberger stresses,

the media “have to be transformed from an apparatus of distribution into an apparatus of communication.”...this “refunctioning of the apparatus” would require an active, aggressive production of publicity on the part of the masses, with the goal of reappropriating the representation of their experience.

(cited from Negt & Kluge [1993]: xxii)

3.3.3 Mobile media and counter-public sphere: Toward a framework for democratizing media and communication system in contemporary China

The framework of the counter-public sphere, particularly its focus on life experience and the right to communication, provides a new approach to understand and theorize about resistance and protests facilitated by mobile media in contemporary China.

In the discussion on the public sphere in contemporary China in the previous chapter, I pointed out that the party seeks stringent communication control to silence opposition—real, potential, or simply perceived—in the public sphere. Under the authoritarian grip of the party, which monopolizes communication power and resources, people have been deprived of methods of communication, or have internalized a fear of voicing their opinions in public because of potential repercussions. Against this backdrop, it may be useful to shift our focus from the public communication sphere (e.g., mass media and the internet) to the (inter-) personal sphere in the wake of increasing use of personal media, especially mobile phones, in collective resistance and popular protests in contemporary China.

More important, in reality, on the one hand, mobile phones have already proven themselves to be an effective way to circumvent the watchful eye of the party and facilitate alternative political discourse; they also offer a new avenue for civic

expression and political participation (Zhao, 2007; Qiu, 2007; Ma, 2008; He, 2008). On the other hand, the huge and continually growing population of Chinese mobile phone subscribers as a whole may represent a unique and considerable opportunity to develop a different communication sphere that dominated by the party and (as experiences elsewhere have shown) generate “mobile democracy” (Rafael, 2003; Nyíri, 2003; Suárez, 2006; Hermanns, 2008; Anduiza, Jensen, & Jorba, 2012). However, most research on mobile phones and empowerment in China has been limited to specific groups in society—migrant (Qiu, 2006, 2008; Wallis, 2008) or youth populations (Wallis, 2011). This obsession with urban lower social strata and young tech-savvy citizens obscures investigation of the relevant social transformations that are occurring and the important democratic activities that are occurring outside of these two groups in tandem with the diffusion of mobile media. Accordingly, as I see it, the discussion on mobile phones as a form of empowerment should be expanded to examine mobile media practices in both everyday life and counteractive and antagonistic activities of any individual or group that represent “the communication have-nots” in the face of the tightening control over communication by the authorities.

As a result, rethinking *how the mobile phone has been adopted and appropriated by “the communication have-nots” to meet their communication needs, against the authorities, generate new power dynamics, and facilitate a counter-public sphere in contemporary China* is crucial to gaining a more complete understanding of this phenomenon. It not only calls for broadening and deepening our understandings of everyday [new] media and communicative practices in an authoritarian country, but also proposes a new research agenda to comprehend counter-public[s] and their counter-hegemonic practices based on a perspective of “social horizon of experience.” To answer this key question, specifically, we have to work step-by-step to explore

answers to the following two sub-topics: (a) the accumulation of social experience and (b) the articulation of this experience as a counter-hegemonic force by virtue of mobile communication.

First, how do mobile media connect one individual's experience with another's to form a general social horizon of experience, shaping social cohesion in everyday life in general, and in contentious activities in particular, in contemporary China?

This sub-question investigates the way in which mobile communication organizes collective experiences and identities. In particular, to avoid "technological determinism," here we address the techno-social interplay or, more specifically, a culture-based approach to understanding the characteristics of mobile communication linkages among individual and the mobile social network in Chinese culture. In addition, we need to figure out how mobile communication connects the individual with collective experience that is produced in either everyday life or contentious activities. Understanding this experience is also vital for us to unpack some issues that are central to the argument on the public sphere and the counter-public sphere, such as rationalism. As Schlesinger criticizes, the rationalism in Habermas's position regarding the public sphere fails to

...provide a convincing framework for understanding what makes collectives cohere. It quite underestimates the undoubted power of non-rationalistic elements of political and national culture that confers a wider, non-deliberative sense of solidarity and belonging.

(Schlesinger, 1997: 387)

In this way, our examination of the relationship between mobile communication and social cohesion from a cultural viewpoint will form the foundation of the counter-public[s], serving as the backdrop for mobilization and participation in rebellion in Chinese society.

Second, how—and to what extent—do mobile phones articulate social experience, generate [creative] resistance, facilitate struggles for an autonomous communication network, empower citizens in undertaking contentious activities, and further create a counter-public sphere beyond the dominant public sphere?

This sub-question focuses on the way in which people deploy their mobile devices and tweak them to fit their needs for articulating social experience and making it relevant for collective resistance in contemporary China. To be specific, I explore the role of the mobile phone in resistance and protests, in shaping counter-public[s], and in forming the counter-public sphere.

(1) How do “the communication have-nots” maneuver using mobile devices for expression, communication, connectivity, and coordination in resistance and protest?

Normatively speaking, free and vibrant expression, communication, and discussion in a public arena are the *sine qua non* of a democratic society. But, as the previous chapter and the review in this chapter demonstrate, communication controls attempt to stifle public opinion, marginalize oppositional voices, and contain social unrest from lower social strata. As a result, citizens seek unusual or creative means of expression, interaction, and communication to overcome governmental controls (for instance, see Yu [2011]). The question about mobile phone use addresses the way in which people leverage mobile media to circumvent censorship and surveillance and strive for an autonomous communication network. In particular, drawing on Scott’s (1985) work on the ways that subaltern groups resist dominance through everyday forms of

resistance, I ask whether, with the help of mobile media as “weapons of the weak,” Chinese citizens may develop creative ways to show that they have not consented to dominance in their mundane communication.

(2) How does mobile communication introduce or reshape concepts of “the public,” “counter-public,” and “public life” in contemporary China?

Given the framework of the counter-public sphere, this question calls for the redefinition of the very notion of the public as “a measure of major changes in the constitution of the public sphere” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: xii) in contemporary China. Among Negt and Kluge’s concerns, as Hansen points out, the dimension of the public “presents itself today in disparate locations and diverse, contradictory constellation” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: xii) as the context of living (*Lebenszusammenhang*) “appears increasingly disjointed, fragmented, and irrelevant” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: xiv). Therefore, the re-conceptualization of the public cannot be separated from the perspective of the general horizon of social experience. Similarly, the notion of counter-public

offers forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation, but these forms are inevitably experienced as mediated, no longer rooted in face-to-face relations, and subject to discursive conflict and negotiation.

(Negt & Kluge, 1993: xxxvi)

In the case of contemporary China, in particular, social stratification increasingly fragments the consensus in regard to general interests (Sun, 2004). Therefore, how do mobile media mediate or establish new integrated mechanisms of a public/counter-

public in terms of their social experience, shaping their identity and promoting connections between citizens?

(3) What are the characteristics of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere and what is its influence on the dominant public sphere, political participation, and the process of democratization in China?

This last question not only considers the impact of the counter-public sphere on both the dominant public sphere and democratic change, but also sheds some light on the factors that constrain the empowerment effect of mobile media in Chinese society.

To summarize, theoretically, this research reflects the unique Chinese socio-techno-cultural landscape that makes it something of an outlier case against either Habermas's bourgeois public sphere or Negt and Kluge's counter-public sphere. In addition, the case of China, mobile media, the counter-public sphere, and democratization brings the discussion of media and democratization into an arena of everyday communication that had previously been ignored. Therefore, this research advances a topic that may generate new understandings of the dynamism of new communication technologies and democratic changes in China and around the world.

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter delineates and justifies this dissertation's research methodology. I first introduce my general research strategy, including objectives and ethical issues, highlighting the specific choice of research design. Second, I elaborate on the concrete approaches, including the selection criteria of cases, the sampling method, and the framework used for in-depth interviews. Third, I explore the limitations of my research design.

4.1 RESEARCH STRATEGY, OBJECTIVES, AND ETHICAL ISSUES

As Jensen (2010: 128) emphasizes, "...the 'how' of research depends on the 'what' and the 'why': the approach must fit the domain and the purpose of inquiry." The aim of my research is to explore how Chinese people adopt mobile phones as a resource to rebel against the authorities, generate new power dynamics, and facilitate a counter-public sphere in contemporary China. More specifically, this aim will be achieved through a two-step process: first, I identify the ways people use mobile phones to produce new types of civil resistance or to mobilize and participate in traditional forms of protest; second, I examine the influence of a mobile-phone-mediated counter-public sphere on the dominant public sphere and democratization in contemporary China. The existing research on either mobile communication or popular protests has barely touched on the subject of mobile-phone-facilitated

collective resistance and popular protest in China. In other words, the topic of my research remains largely unexplored. Therefore, both the novelty and specific nature (i.e., resistance and protest in China) of the topic call for an *exploratory* study in the sense of *qualitative* approach.

To achieve the above goals, this project employs the multiple-case study design to investigate “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 2009: 18) because this design allows for both comparing differences within and between cases and generalizing what is common across the cases. To be more specific, I adopt fieldwork as a necessary step for an investigation on the use of mobile media both at the level of everyday life and at that of public protest for expression, mobilization, and coordination in contemporary China. As early as 1899, in his study of village life in China, Smith suggests, “if we wish to comprehend the Chinese, we must take the roof from their homes, in order to learn what is going on within” (Smith, 1899: 16-17). To depict an accurate account of the situation while avoiding certain stereotypes and generalizations in social sciences, quite a few studies that have been conducted by Chinese or non-Chinese scholars validate the usefulness of fieldwork as “a conscious methodological approach” (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006: 5)¹.

Because of the sensitive nature of collective resistance and popular protests, one always meets with difficulties in discovering what is really happening in protest events (Archer, 2000: 6-7). Most notable, as Archer points out, is the deficiency of “individual acts of protest” (2000: 7) in studies of protest. To overcome this problem, what we should not neglect in studies of popular protest is that the individual’s perception and action constitute an essential means by which to analyze and understand the initiation, progress, success, or failure of popular protests. Therefore,

¹ For example, the prominent fieldwork-based studies on the Student Movement of 1989, see Calhoun (1994) and Zhao (2001); the fieldwork study on peasant rebellions in rural China, see O'Brien & Li (2006).

by conducting a fieldwork-based study and taking an “emic” perspective (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990), I am able to explore how Chinese people perceive and use mobile media for expression, mobilization, and coordination, thereby facilitating civic engagement and political participation. Furthermore, by finding out what people actually do with mobile phones and how they actually think and behave both at the level of everyday life and at that of public protest, I am able to elaborate on the emerging role of mobile media in democratization in China.

Equally important, to maintain a neutral position as a researcher, I do not put myself in any resistant or protest activity, even if I have also received calls and text messages about some events (e.g., the anti-PX event in Xiamen and the Weng’an incident). In particular, as a Chinese researcher, on the one hand, I have the advantage of already knowing the culture and easily accessing the people I want to interview. On the other hand, this identity also reminds me to distance myself from this familiar environment in order to learn to be an “outsider.” For instance, to keep an “etic” perspective in this research, I regularly question any practice that seems normal while using mobile phones. In this way, I collect as much potentially relevant data as possible and consider it in context in order to accurately describe a behavior (e.g., under what circumstances—and how—do people distribute rumor via mobile phones?) or belief (why do people distribute rumor via their mobile phones?) as an observer. I concentrate on the everyday, taken-for-granted mobile phone practices. In general, I keep in mind in my data collection process that the emic-etic conception is a dialectic interaction.

Given the complexity of relevant issues in the Chinese context, the question of validity is addressed in this research by three considerations: (a) integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain a deeper understanding of people’s

actions and practices; (b) combining historical, observational, and interview methods to gain a comprehensive picture of resistance and protest; and (c) eliciting views from different social groups of mobile phone users (e.g., the urban middle class, rural-to-urban migrant workers, and rural populations) in multiple cases to ensure the research has integrity and adequately examines what it is intended to examine. In other words, the collection of data from multiple groups of mobile phone users in different cases allows me to replicate findings across cases and generalize conclusions in a theoretical sense. The general analytical strategy is to rely on theoretical propositions in which:

[t]he original objectives and design of the case study presumably were based on such propositions, which in turn reflected a set of research questions, reviews of the literature, and new hypotheses or propositions.

(Yin, 2009: 130)

In this study, more specifically, my exploration and analysis is based on the theoretical proposition of the counter-public sphere. Given the theoretical orientation of a counter-public sphere, the original objective and design of the case study in this research accordingly aim at exploring the role of mobile phones in facilitating struggles for the right to communication, generating a relatively autonomous sphere of communication, and producing counter-hegemonic discourses against the dominant public sphere in contemporary China. The basic proposition—that mobile communication may facilitate the counter-public sphere—reflects, first, a set of questions, including, for instance, how people appropriate their mobile devices as a resource for expression, communication, and coordination in resistance and protest

against the regime, how mobile communication articulates social experience and makes it relevant to the whole society, and how—and to what extent—the mobile-phone-facilitated communicative sphere exerts influence on the dominant public sphere¹. Second, it also reflects reviews of the literature on media and democracy in China in general, and on new media and their political implication in contemporary China in particular. Third, this proposition has been traced in case studies of several collective resistance movements and popular protests. The analytical method includes explanation building and cross-case synthesis, through which we could revise our theoretical statement and generalize findings across cases (Yin, 2009: 141-144, 156-160).

In order to foreground ethical practices, I obtained permission from both research assistants² and interviewees in all cases. To be specific, each participant involved in data collection, focus groups³, or interviews was given information on this research, including the background of the researcher, the purpose of this project, information on anonymity and confidentiality, and his/her right to withdraw from the process at any time. Because participation in protest and resistance against the authorities are politically sensitive issues in China, we wanted participants not only to be completely voluntary but also to be safe after participating in this research. In other words, this research actively tried not to disrupt participants' lives or cause harm.

Second, all interviews were conducted face-to-face in friendly environments, or in socio-mental spaces that the interviewees would often inhabit or visit. In all cases, the

¹ See the detailed research question and sub-questions in *Chapter Three*.

² It is necessary to elaborate on and address the role of research assistants in this study. First, due to the limited amount of travel funds available in my PhD project, it is impossible for me to travel to China and get to the scene of the latest protest or resistance after it happens. Therefore, I employ research assistants to help collect real-time data and, if necessary, carry out interviews immediately after protest or resistance happens. Second, comparing with the present researcher, research assistants that are native are easy to get close to local residents, earn their trust, and gain more detailed and “sensitive” information on resistance and protest.

³ See the detailed description of methods in *Chapter Five* about mobile social networks.

promise of anonymity was essential. In addition, we documented interviews only when our interviewee was comfortable with this. If documenting was seen as too intrusive for a candid conversation, I instead summarized the interview immediately after each session and got confirmation from interviewees. Interviewees were also assured that the information collected would be securely stored and would only be available to the researcher and that all responses would be carefully analyzed.

This research design highlights the following two points that I will elaborate on later, particularly in the sample section. First, the mobile media in this study are not only a research object (the key apparatus) in facilitating civil resistance or mobilizing popular protests, but also are a relevant way to locate citizen activists involved in these events. Second, I introduce respondent-driven sampling (RDS) (Heckathorn, 1997), a network-based sampling method, into both mobile social network studies and the field of contentious politics in China. In this way, I hope to call more attention to this sampling method for future studies of network-based mobilization and protests.

4.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.2.1 Multiple-case studies

Case studies have been used widely and successfully to investigate a far-reaching range of topics within the fields of humanities and social sciences (Flyvbjerg, 2006; George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007; Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2003, 2009). While many case studies have revolved around a single case, the multiple-case design allows a researcher to explore the phenomena under study through the use of a replication strategy. On the one hand, one of the key advantages of the multiple-case study approach is that, as Yin stresses, “the typical criteria regarding sample size are

irrelevant” (2009: 58) because this approach does not rely on the type of representative sampling logic used in survey research. Instead, the results turn out as sufficient to “provide compelling support for the initial set of propositions” (Yin, 2009: 54). On the other hand, multiple-case study research not just addresses the diversity and complexity of Chinese society, but also helps us to qualify, synthesize, and generalize our observations beyond the specific instance. It is commonly argued that China is too big, too complex, and too thoroughly integrated with the rest of the world. Accordingly, a single case does not represent the entire picture. A similar, or even identical, event might produce totally different results when it occurs in a different context (e.g., urban or rural China), or within different populations (e.g., migrant workers or university students). Multiple-case design takes this kind of diversity and complexity into consideration. By looking into similar cases—mobile-phone-mediated resistance or protests—happening independently in different situations, circumstances, or groups, we are better able to generalize our conclusions. Therefore, to develop tools to extract more out of the limited information available, the research strategy adopted here is to conduct multiple case studies as a crucial approach to examine the “prototypical” cases.

Concerning what this study calls a prototypical case, I selected cases that met the following three criteria. First, these cases involved spontaneous use of mobile phones to facilitate information distribution, mobilize collective actions, or organize popular protests. Second, these cases either occurred frequently (e.g., mobile phone rumor) in everyday life, or provided models for later similar events (e.g., the text-messaging-facilitated demonstration in Xiamen in 2007). In other words, the selected cases represent a variety of principles that have been echoed in other cases, counteracting the common criticism that findings are unique to the particular case. Third, whether

the case succeeded in, for instance, changing the government's mind or policies through mobile-phone-enabled collective action was not a necessary criterion for selection because there are too many other [contingent] factors influencing government decisions to act or adopt a certain plan. Therefore, by focusing on the actual use of mobile phones in cases instead of their result, we are able to explore the wider role of mobile phones in collective resistance and popular protests. In short, as I see it, these criteria help us to have a balanced view of the influence of mobile phones on democratization in contemporary China.

Here it should be pointed out that this study is not an attempt to explain the various factors that caused collective resistance or popular protests, but instead to investigate and interpret how and to what extent mobile phones enter into these events in the context of constraints in contemporary China.

As such, this research builds on over ten cases that took place at several locations around China. The cases include, for instance, New Year SMS Greetings, taxi drivers' strikes in Fuzhou (2010), Guangzhou, and Shenzhen (2010) (in the chapter about mobile social network); the anti-PX demonstrations in Xiamen (2007) and Dalian (2011), and the mass incidents in Zengcheng (2011) (in the chapter about mobile phone rumors); the mass incident in Weng'an (2008) (in the chapter about mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests) and so on. In my later chapters, I describe these cases in more detail. Here, I take some cases as examples to clarify my selections of cases. Concrete information on specific cases and data will be reported in various chapters.

First, to explore the way in which mobile media shape social cohesion in everyday life in general, and popular protest in particular, I take, for instance, the role of mobile phones in job-hunting activities in the everyday life of migrant workers and the taxi

drivers' strike in Fuzhou in 2010 as examples. The allocation of jobs is a typical case that is often used to illustrate social networks in China (Bian, 1994, 1997). As several studies have shown, the mass use of low-cost mobile services gives mobile phones a significant role in migrant workers' daily life, including formation of "translocal networks" and transmission of job information (Ke, 2008; Law & Chu, 2008; Law & Peng, 2006; Lin & Tong, 2008; Qiu, 2009; Wallis, 2008). The exchange of job information through mobile devices thus provides a useful means of looking at how mobile media consolidate and enhance social inclusion in everyday life.

For another thing, the mobile phone has increasingly become a key resource for facilitating collective resistance and popular protests in contemporary China. More specifically, for instance, discontent with the controversially rigid manner of enforcing traffic regulations by local police, or the long-standing concerns including unlicensed competition, high fuel prices, and rising rental fees due to the inaction of local government, taxi drivers in Yinchuan, Hefei, Beijing, Zhengzhou, Changchun, Harbin, Chongqing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Chaozhou, and Sanya¹ staged strikes one after another between 2008 and 2011 by primarily using calls and texts via their mobile phones (BBC, 2008; Branigan, 2008; Fan, 2008; Lam, 2008; Xinhua, 2009). One of the latest strikes in a long line of driver protests happened in Fuzhou, the capital of southeast China's Fujian province, on April 23, 2010, in response to a recent surge in penalties handed out by the police (*China Daily*, 2010a). I thus take the strike in Fuzhou to examine how taxi drivers, learning from previous strikes, employed their mobile devices as a means of accumulating their social capital and organizing strike actions.

¹ For a brief list of municipal taxi strikes in China from 2004 to 2009, see Worker Freedom (2008).

Second, to excavate various forms of mobile-media–facilitated collective resistance in mundane activities (Scott, 1985), this study takes mobile phone rumor as a frequent phenomenon in contemporary China. News reports show that mobile phone rumors proliferate in contemporary China (Hu, 2009; Larson, 2011; Li, 2007; Lv & Wang, 2010; Pei, 2008). Of various kinds of rumors, the earthquake-related ones easily trigger the greatest panic in China. According to news reports, for instance, earthquake rumors via mobile phones and the internet ran rife over ten provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, including Shanxi (January to February), Jiangsu, Shaanxi, Hebei, Inner Mongolia and Beijing (April), Shandong (May), and Hubei (May to June) in the first half of 2010 alone (*China Daily*, 2010b; Li & Zhao, 2010; Phoenix Satellite Television, 2010). Among these rumors, the one about the Shanxi Province at the beginning of 2010 not only launched widespread panic, but also prompted thousands of people in dozens of cities and counties to leave their houses and to evacuate to the streets after midnight (*China Daily*, 2010b; Li & Zhao, 2010; Lv & Wang, 2010; Wang & Sun, 2010). More importantly, the practice of rumor spreading openly and deliberately defied government’s rumor denial and request that people should not participate in rumor dissemination. Accordingly, this research uses the Shanxi case to highlight a particular set of mobile-media–enacted civil resistance events and political practices in which citizens, particularly those without complicated technical skills (e.g., to evade the censors), vent their anger over the censorship and express their disgust at authorities’ attempts to interrupt or even suppress ordinary interaction and communication in the name of “rumor.”¹

¹ See *Chapter Six* on mobile phone rumors.

Third, concerning the role of mobile media in popular protests, let us take another two cases as examples: the anti-PX “walk”¹ in Xiamen in 2007 and the mass incident in Weng’an in 2008. The anti-PX “walk” is one of the biggest middle-class protests of recent years against a chemical factory that local residents perceived as a threat to their well-being (*The Economist*, 2007). In this event, local government had been forced to shelve a chemical plant after a demonstration that had been largely facilitated and organized by mobile phones against the construction of this plant. Reportedly, with the help of mobile phones, particularly text messaging, local residents succeeded in breaking the censorship and organizing demonstrations, which play a relevant, if not decisive, role in changing local government’s decision. Therefore, some reports even named this success in Xiamen as “the power of text messaging” (China Newsweek, 2007) to highlight the emerging role of the mobile phone and its applications (e.g., SMS and MMS) in civic engagement and political participation. Most important, learning from the Xiamen case, citizens duplicated/replicated this model of mobile-phone-facilitated mobilization and participation by using their mobile devices to organize demonstrations or protests in other cities to protest against the government’s decisions (e.g., the “200-people’s group walk” in Chengdu [Huang, 2008], the anti-maglev protests in Shanghai [Kurtenbach, 2008] in 2008 and the anti-PX demonstration in Dalian in 2011 [YouTube, 2011]). Therefore, this research takes the anti-PX event in Xiamen as a prototypical example to explore the role of mobile phones in urban demonstrations.

Similarly, with the help of mobile devices, mild frustrations and anger in rural China can easily turn into fury within minutes. In the Weng’an case, mobile communication not only aggregated the deep-seated resentment among local residents towards the

¹ Chinese people prefer “walk,” a euphemism for “demonstration,” a much more sensitive politically-loaded term, to describe their demonstrations against some unpopular events.

government, but also triggered one of the biggest riots in China's rural areas in recent years (Ding, 2008). This event shows that, on the one hand, mobile-phone-facilitated mobilization emerges as a pattern of collective actions in rural areas (Yu, 2008). The Weng'an model can also be found in later popular protests in rural areas, such as the mass incident in Shishou in 2009 (DWnews, 2009; He, 2009). On the other hand, mobile-phone-facilitated popular protest demonstrates its power to breach heavy censorship and organize large-scale protests against the authorities during an intensely controlled period just weeks before China hosted the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing (Zhang, Zhu, & Huang, 2008). Therefore, this research takes the Weng'an mass incident as a typical and classic example to explore the role of mobile phones in rural demonstrations.

In sum, these case studies portend the end of neither the struggles for information, communication, rights, and democratization, nor mobile-phone-facilitated collective resistance and popular protests in contemporary China. By considering the impact of these events, the multiple case studies offer a close look at collective resistance and popular protests and the outcome of civic engagement and political participation through mobile media. Moreover, they reflect the underlying social and psychological contexts in which both activism and its mobile applications are embedded, drawing out implications about mobile-media-empowered resistance and protests in general.

4.2.2 Participant observation

Participant observation has been employed to explore people's contextual experiences through an intensive involvement with them in their environment (DeWalt, DeWalt, & Wayland, 1998). Recalling the exploratory research agenda of this study, we

prioritize participant observation as a relevant way of gathering data and understanding practice from the subjects' points-of-view.

Generally speaking, there are three reasons to exploit participant observation in this study. First, participant observation helps researchers experience events as an insider in the same way that the people they are studying experience these events. As Scott (1985: 46) addresses in his ethnographic study of everyday resistance, “[o]nly an inquiry into the experience of tenants, the meaning they attach to the event, can offer us the possibility of an answer.” In other words, by personally experiencing these settings, researchers will better understand participants' own feelings and practice and better communicate with them.

Second, participant observation provides an opportunity to discover new affordances of the mobile phone for civic engagement and political participation. As an emerging resource for collective resistance and popular protests in both China and the world, mobile media have a potential that is simultaneously largely unexplored and not yet systematized and theorized. Participant observation allows researchers to start from the very basic phenomenon and propose several new inductive generalizations by involving themselves in resistance and protests.

Third, data from observation in the natural setting offer key raw materials for later interviews and analyses in this study. To a certain degree, these data are even more relevant than interviewees' memories and self-reports because, on the one hand, as Scott (1985: 46) argues, “a good deal of behavior, including speech, is automatic and unreflective, based on understandings that are seldom if ever raised to the level of consciousness.” In other words, participants, particularly in everyday resistance, may not fully realize the logic or motivations behind their resistant behaviors. On the other hand, “human agents may also provide contradictory accounts of their own behavior,

or they may wish to conceal their understanding from the observer or from one another” (Scott, 1985: 46). Put differently, interviewees may distort information through recall error, selective perceptions, and/or a desire to please the interviewer. Therefore, by adopting a participant observation approach, we are in a better position to show how behavior speaks for itself rather than how people speak for themselves in collective resistance and popular protests.

Given these arguments, whenever possible, I adopt direct observation (by myself or by research assistants that I employ) to develop an insider’s view of what is happening and to get a systematic, detailed description of mobile phone usage behaviors in collective resistance and popular protests (e.g., how participants use their mobile phone to record protests and spread these photos or videos on the internet). All research assistants were trained in data collection, interviewing techniques, and reporting requirements. In addition, all expenses incurred by observation activities (e.g., transportation and accommodations) were reimbursed.

We succeeded in carrying out participant observation in the following three cases: the anti-PX demonstration in Xiamen in 2007, the earthquake rumor in Shanxi in 2010, and the taxi drivers’ strike in Fuzhou in 2010. Nevertheless, against a backdrop of intimidation, repression, and censorship from the authorities, most collective resistance and popular protests last a very short period of time. In addition, these events have hardly been covered by mass media. Consequently, people usually hear about these events after they have ended. All of these factors increase the difficulties associated with collecting data through an observation approach alone. Additionally, participant observation in this research was restricted to a fairly small-scale population as is the case in most of the research that employs this method. Therefore, we carried out interviews with participants in the sample group to improve the

strength, credibility, and validity of our arguments in general, and to further understand participants' perceptions and interpretations of the role of mobile phones in collective resistance and popular protests in particular. In the next section, I discuss the sampling method and process.

4.2.3 Snowball sampling and Respondent-Driven Sample

As highlighted in the first part of this chapter, mobile media in this study are both a research object and a useful approach to locating citizen activists involved in contentious activities. For the latter, specifically, we adopted two kinds of sampling methods to locate participants on the basis of the unique characteristics of mobile and social networks in China as follows: first, Snowball Sampling (Goodman, 1961) for “mundane” interactions via mobile phones (e.g., new year greetings and seeking jobs); second, Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS) (Heckathorn, 1997, 2002, 2007) for “special” interactions and communication via mobile phones, which refer to mobile media's specific use in collective resistance and popular protests.

Both snowball sampling and RDS are network-based sampling approaches. As an increasingly relevant communication channel for social connections, mobile social networks enable people within one's social network to be accessed and contacted from one's mobile phone (Fortunati, 2002; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling, 2004, 2008). Therefore, both approaches can be used to identify and sample people within one's mobile social network. Nevertheless, due to the political sensitivity of collective resistance and popular protests in China, we introduce RDS in particular to sample participants in mobile-phone-mediated events.

As a network-based sampling method, RDS has been invented and validated to locate the hidden and hard-to-reach populations in society, such as drug users,

prostitutes, and homosexuals (Heckathorn, 1997, 2002; Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004; Wejnert, 2009; Wejnert & Heckathorn, 2008). Effectively and safely penetrating social populations accessible only to insiders, RDS combines the coverage breadth of network-based methods with the standard chain-referral sampling methods. In China, participating in a demonstration or protest, or even spreading rumors, is strictly forbidden by the regime as a crime (*Beijing Daily Messenger*, 2003). Accordingly, participators are normally fearful, unwilling, or reluctant to admit to their participation, much less to share their experiences with strangers, who are the “outsiders” at these events. Therefore, identifying participants in collective resistance and popular protests in contemporary China is comparable to identifying hidden populations in society. This is the general reason for choosing RDS as the sampling method in this study.

Furthermore, our sampling process is based on mobile social networks or, perhaps, a mobile phone-based RDS, which has not yet been used by RDS research. Nevertheless, there are several relevant reasons for adopting RDS on mobile social networks as a way to sample participants in the context of China.

First, as a social-network-based sampling strategy, RDS is, as Wejnert and Heckathorn address, “...best suited for populations structured around social interaction” (Wejnert & Heckathorn, 2008: 111). Mobile social networks are, to a great extent, a product of social networks in real-life situations (Castells, Fernandez - Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling, 2004, 2008; Ling & Donner, 2009). In other words, a mobile social network is based on populations with existing personal contact patterns extended to the mobile sphere. Therefore, a mobile social network provides RDS with a similar social network that is based on [mobile-technology-mediated] personal contacts and structured around social interaction.

Second, mobile-social-network–based sampling ensures that the sample comprises populations that facilitate resistant or protest activities via their mobile devices. To put it differently, mobile phones in these cases are the primary means for citizens to disseminate messages, facilitate communication, and organize contentious activities. Accordingly, identifying the sample (participants) through mobile social networks verifies that sample members are indeed subjects of the target population. In addition, as Salganik and Heckathorn suggest, “the sample gives us information about not just the people in the population but also the network connecting them” (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004: 230). By applying RDS to the mobile social network, we are able to not only identify participants in mobile-phone–assisted popular protests but also observe the (potential) power of mobile social networks through the prism of network-based mobile communication among these samples.

Third, and most important, the trust within [mobile] social networks in the Chinese context helps us carry out an open dialogue between researchers (e.g., the “outsiders” of popular protests) and interviewees (e.g., the “insiders” of these protests), thus ensuring the truth and quality of interview data. More specifically, as we mentioned before, the sample population in this research is always subjected to considerable repression, such as investigation, detention, and arrests by the party-state and its public security organs as they either organize or participate in popular protests. Therefore, as an outsider to these populations, researcher has found it hard to access, or penetrate these populations, because they either refuse to be interviewed, or are reluctant to talk too much about their own experiences as participants in protests. Similarly, these participants are hesitant, or even refuse to give the researcher information about other participants who they know have been active or involved in popular protests. With this backdrop, the mutual trust that has been introduced by

guanxi networks is critical for guaranteeing both sampling and interview success. Importantly, as a culture-specific mutual dynamic within social networks in Chinese society, *guanxi* makes relevant contributions to building, maintaining, enhancing, and transferring interpersonal trust within society, which accordingly ensures a certain degree of honest dialogue and accurate information. Moreover, mobile voice calls and text messaging are nearly a proxy for face-to-face interaction with a person's social network (Ling, 2004, 2008; Ling & Donner, 2009). As a way of interpersonal interaction, mobile communication thus implicitly carries and transfers "*guanxi*" within user-established lists of contacts. In practice, for instance, when we followed introductions from the first-wave interviewees to those in the second wave (within the first group's [mobile] social network), we fostered a relatively close relationship with those in the second wave. Likewise, those in the second wave found us trustworthy, spoke candidly during interviews, and introduced us to others (i.e., third wave interviewees). In short, mobile media not only provide a means of mobilizing resistance and protests in contentious activities, but also generate a sphere with trustworthiness and mutual reliance¹.

This point forms the major difference between my research design and that of earlier studies, such as Heckathorn's works, which do not require participants to "divulge any sensitive information to the researcher" (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004: 207). In other words, given the distinctive social-political culture, a lot of information that may not seem to be politically sensitive in the western context becomes politically sensitive in China. Accordingly, a climate of fear deters people from speaking or sharing their experiences, the "sensitive information" in contemporary China. Here,

¹ More detail is provided in the next chapter on mobile social networks in China.

trust plays a key role in getting this kind of politically sensitive information from participants.

Furthermore, the mobile-social-network–based RDS method works to overcome personal bias during interviews, such as bias toward gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or religion, in particular through “a dual incentive system” (Heckathorn, 1997: 178). More specifically, this method provides certain financial incentives for interviewees to participate and recruit each other for one-on-one interviews.

Following the RDS design (Heckathorn, 1997: 179-180), the sampling process was implemented in the following four steps:

First, for each case, we recruited a certain number of people (three to eight) non-randomly to serve as the initial “seeds.” These initial seeds should be diverse and drawn from a variety of geographical areas occupied by the target population. In practice, these seeds were introduced by the researcher’s friends, classmates, or colleagues who received calls or texts during sample cases. Because most of the researcher’s friends, classmates, or colleagues were working as editors or journalists in news agencies, they were normally easier to get information from and contact than the majority in China, who do not have comparable access to communication.

Second, after the seeds had been informed about the project and agreed to participate, they received recruitment notification formally informing them of the project’s purpose, compensation, and recruitment process. Next, we gave financial incentives to these seeds to recruit their peers whom they called or texted via their mobile devices during collective resistance or popular protests into the same interview they had completed. These incentives included the Oxford World’s Classics novel (20 DKK) or Danish souvenirs (around 25 to 30 DKK). Similarly, the second group recruited their

peers in the second chain-referral wave. The next subjects continued this process for recruiting as many people as desired. Each recruitment has been documented in note.

Third, we rewarded people for completing the interview and gave additional bonuses for recruiting their peers. Importantly, the average cost per recruited subject was limited to not exceed 50 DKK. These small financial incentives have been used “to prevent the emergence of semi-professional recruiters” (Heckathorn, 1997: 179-180). Fourth, each sampling process adopted nine waves of recruitment, following the estimated number of waves required for equilibrium for an Asian population (Wejnert, 2009: 92).

Our study sample is composed of interviewees ranging from journalists, civil servants, and college and university students to NGO leaders, migrant workers, local peasants, and so on. Most important, instead of reaching only the most visible, vocal, and loudest protestors, the greatest benefit of RDS in this study is that it helps to encourage ordinary people to speak openly, thus enabling us to understand their perceptions and practices with regards to mobile media. In addition, RDS also allows us to learn about the network patterns of mobile-phone–mobilized demonstration.

I here take the sample process in Xiamen in December 2009 as an example. I began by inviting five people as *initial “seeds”* (wave 0 of the sample) that are chose based on my preexisting contacts with the study population in Xiamen. They are a 25-year-old graduate student, a 28-year-old newspaper editor, a 37-year-old civil servant in local government, a 33-year-old white-collar worker in advertising company, and a 32-year-old freelancer. Based on peer recruitment, the sampling process was initiated by asking each initial seed to invite three to five interviewees (the actual number depends on how many people the initial seed is able to recruit in practice). The recruited population hereby constitutes wave one of the sample. These interviewees

were not necessarily famous or very visible, but had a network of relationships in a community, because RDS depends on a high contact pattern of the subjects studied. Next, each of these recruits was interviewed in person in a friendly environment. Following the interview, each of these “seeds” was given three to five souvenirs, with which to recruit additional interviewees. The sampling continues in this way until the desired waves of recruitment (i.e., nine) is reach. Including the initial seeds, the total sampling population is 89. Two people finally declined our interviews because they considered the topic is too sensitive. Accordingly we have done 87 interviews. Meanwhile, we planned to pay each respondent 30 CNY (around 4.4 USD, rate 6.8 in 2009) for each additional interviewee as “the suitable incentives” (Heckathorn, 1997: 176). The limit set on payment incentives was intended to avoid over-representing particular groups of interviewees and excluding others. In practice, one of the indirect, important findings was the interviewees’ deep desire to share their anti-PX stories without compensation.

4.2.4 In-depth interview and interview framework

After the sampling was finished, I, in some cases with the help from research assistants, carried out in-depth interviews to collect data. The central concern of this interpretative approach, as we have addressed, is understanding the use of mobile phones in both everyday experiences and specific practices during collective resistance and popular protests. Because of the nature of this type of research, investigations are often connected with methods such as in-depth interviewing and the collection of relevant documents. As Maykut and Morehouse advocate:

The data of qualitative inquiry is most often people's words and actions, and thus requires methods that allow the researcher to capture language and behavior. The most useful ways of gathering these forms of data are participant observation, in-depth interviews, group interviews, and the collection of relevant documents.

(Maykut & Morehouse, 1994: 46)

Therefore, the in-depth interview here enables an explanation of practices and perceptions of mobile media use for civic engagement and political participation in samples of different ages, genders, occupations, social strata, and regional groups in protest cases as well as in everyday life.

In practice, I collected and read a broad range of reports about popular protests in the area before conducting the interviews in order to make these interviews more informative as well as more sensitive to local issues. These archives included a broad range of official statistics, academic works, and particularly media reports and internal reference materials¹ (if possible) on mobile-phone–assisted popular protests. Based on archive information (in three cases we also included observation data), I carried out semi-structured in-depth interviews with the participants to investigate how they perceive and appropriate their mobile phones in collective resistance and popular protests. In particular, we concentrated on the way in which mobile media have been used to initiate, mobilize, and disseminate information on these protests.

In general, I encouraged interviewees to recall and discuss their concerns freely, including feelings, attitudes, and understandings with regard to a wide variety of aspects of mobile phone uses for collective resistance or popular protests. Each

¹ For a discussion of “internal reference materials”, see He (2008): Chapter Four: “Internal (*neibu*) Documents” and the Secrecy System.

interview averaged around two hours. In most cases, we only had the one round of interviewing. But in some instances, if necessary (e.g., to double check information), we carried out a second round of interviews via telephone or the internet. In particular, whenever possible, I contacted participants and listened to their recollections of an event that they had either witnessed or been involved in as soon as possible¹ after it happened. The immediate interview helped me locate possible “seeds” in an event for future interviews; second, it produced the account of individuals’ involvement in an event as soon as possible to make recollections as rich as possible; and third, it allowed for ample time to consider the issues involved and increased the depth of understanding of events.

A semi-structured interview guide helped interviewees describe how they had used their mobile phones in collective resistance and popular protests during politically sensitive events. The subjects were asked to consider and probe their own behaviors in and responses to mobilizing calls/texts they received and the impact of messages from mobile phones on their own lives, their social relationships, and society during the sample cases. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was used so that interviewees could explain in their own words how they perceived the role of mobile media; the researcher did not want to plant any ideas of what that role should be or create any perceived expectations for desirable responses.

At the beginning of the interview, an introduction informed the interviewees of the researcher’s name and the purpose of this research. Next, interviewees were asked the following three sets of open-ended questions to ascertain both their uses of mobile devices and views on the role of mobile phones during their daily lives in general and

¹ During my fieldwork in China, I used mobile phone and Internet-based instant message tools, including QQ, MSN, and Fetion, a telecommunication service provided by China Mobile, to contact others instantly. When I was in Denmark (e.g., the taxi driver strike in Fuzhou on April 23, 2010), I mainly depended on an internet-based phone.

collective resistance and popular protests in particular: one set of questions on *basic information* in mobile phone messages, such as content, when they are received, and how often they are received; a second set of questions on the *interpretation* of messages via mobile phone, including how people perceive the message on their mobile device, whether they believe it or not and why; a third set of questions registered how people *deal with* mobile phone messages, such as do they disseminate the message or respond, to whom they forward the message, via which channels, and why.

For instance, to explore the role of mobile phone rumor in the daily lives of individuals in general and popular protests in particular, we asked our interviewees the following questions:

1. Did you receive mobile phone messages (what the government calls “rumors”) during this event (this question was to double-check that interviewees had indeed received or sent these messages during the sample events)?

2. Please provide detailed answers to the following questions if possible.

- (about *the basic information*) What was the general content of the messages, how many did you receive, when did you receive them, via which means (voice, text, or other), and from whom?

In practice, if interviewees had not yet deleted or had stored these messages, we asked them to write down the contents and date and give this information to us. For the protection of privacy and anonymity, interviewees were allowed to answer generally about the source of these messages, such as from relatives, friends, colleagues, and so on.

- (about *the interpretation*) How did you perceive these messages on your mobile device, did you believe them or not, why?

- (about *the action*) How did you deal with the messages that you have received, did you forward it, how many did you forward, to whom, when, and why?

In practice, if interviews were conducted right after or very soon after an event, our interviewees usually had not yet deleted received and sent messages. Thus, we asked them to write down the content, date, and how many they had sent if via text message and to provide us with this information. We requested written content because, although in some instances (e.g., the anti-PX demonstration in Xiamen), I already had the content, people may have received modified versions. Thus, it was desirable to collect as many versions of mobile phone rumors as possible. In addition, if applicable, I asked participants why they had modified the content. To protect privacy and anonymity, interviewees were permitted to answer generally about the destinations of these messages: relatives, friends, colleagues, and so on.

In addition, for mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests, we explored the role of mobile phones in mobilizing participation through the following additional questions concerning participants' action during protests:

- How did you respond to the call for collective action (e.g., "stroll"), and why?

- Have you ever seen other people using mobile phones in/during popular protests?

When and how did they use it? Have you ever used it yourself when you met with others, or were involved in a protest? How and why?

- Have you ever forwarded or received messages about popular protests from your mobile phone? When, how often, and from/to whom? How did you deal with these messages from your mobile network and why?

Data generated from these interviews gave a detailed view of how the sample participants viewed the role of mobile media in everyday resistance and popular protests.

It should be noted that the researcher faced some constraints during the interviews. One of the major difficulties with a study on collective resistance and popular protests is to what extent participants' recalled experiences reflect protest reality. More or less, participants may understate, overstate, or exaggerate their emotions, practice, and experiences during these events due to their feelings. To verify facts and ensure accuracy, I cross-checked statements and identified discrepancies among different interviewees about the same event. When discrepancies or differences appeared, I restated or summarized this information and then asked participants to clarify points during a later interview.

4.3 DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

After data collection, I employed the cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2003: 133-137) and explanation-building approach (Yin, 2003: 120-122) to delve into questions of “how” and “why” mobile-phone-equipped citizens in China adopt their mobile devices as a resource against the authorities in contemporary China. Cross-case synthesis was specifically applied to the analysis of multiple cases (Yin, 2009: 156), while the explanation-building approach interpreted our findings within the framework of the counter-public sphere theory that we proposed.

For instance, in the study of mobile phone rumors, I identified a common phenomenon from cases in both rural and urban China: the official (government) rumor denials normally failed to stop the transmission and persistence of the rumor. Rather, people seemed more likely to involve themselves in spreading those rumors, especially after the government denied them. This action resulted in rapid diffusion of the rumor within the mobile social network. Notably, some interviewees just

disseminated these “rumors” without carefully reading and reflecting on their contents. Thus, I attempted to understand “rumor” beyond its content: specifically, discerning whether it was true or false. Furthermore, given the cross-case analysis, I discovered that the reason why people forwarded the officially labeled “rumor” without first determining its truth was because they regarded the government’s decision to taken an official stance on the subject as a means of suppressing communication, or specifically, interaction, discussion, and deliberation about such events. Thus, the practice of spreading rumors can be viewed as a way of struggling against communication constraints and defending the right to communication. Furthermore, the proliferation of rumor through mobile phones magnifies people’s resistant voices and actions against the official hegemonic discourse of rumor accusation in the dominant public sphere. In this way, mobile phone rumors create a specific kind of counter-public sphere in contemporary China.

Importantly, because my exploratory study aims to set up a new framework for understanding the implications of mobile media for democracy through investigating and generalizing cases that include mobile-phone–facilitated collective resistance and popular protests in China, we use cross-case synthesis¹ only to identify the general features instead of comparing the difference between these cases.

4.4 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

First, as we mentioned earlier in this chapter, I take an “etic” perspective and distance myself from mobile-phone–facilitated activity to maintain a neutral position. In other

¹ See more details in Chapter Seven, which includes the anti-PX demonstration in Xiamen as the case in urban China and the mass incident in Weng’an as the case in rural China to synthesize the role of mobile phone in facilitating offline popular protests.

words, my goal is to obtain objective data without involvement. However, this choice to a certain degree loses details that participants would experience, particularly the emotion associated with these events. In other words, this approach suffers from the lack of “emic” understanding of the thing being (i.e., resistance or protest) studied. Among many other things, specifically, I am unable to experience the emotions other participants felt during, for instance, the mobilization process in public resistance or protest.

Second, because of time and financial limitations, my fieldwork was mainly carried out in late 2010 and early 2011. Accordingly, most of the observations and interviews were conducted within this time period. Therefore, for events that happened before 2010, interview was the only available method for collecting data. In other words, our data relied largely on interviewees’ own memory, which, without doubt, does not reflect the full characteristics of the events. Although detailed interviews have been done to cover this deficit, there are still likely to be some missing points. Additionally, this study does not focus on events that happened after 2011, particularly the latest applications of mobile media in collective resistance and popular protests after the robust and sprawling development of China’s microblogs and smart phones. These platforms, although still only available to certain groups of people, such as the middle class and government officials, are increasingly emerging as a means of connecting people from diverse social stratas and facilitating cooperation among them. Therefore, in the future we should extend this research to understand the interaction between mobile phones, a typically *mundane* communication tool, and the latest “emerging tools” (e.g., microblogs and social networking sites) (Nielsen, 2011).

Finally, the politically sensitive nature of popular protests still affects, or even hinders, participants’ answers to our questions. In practice, even as I take advantage

of *guanxi* to gain access to interviewees, there were still quite a lot people who refused our interviews due to “sensitive political reasons.”¹ This point also affects the quality of our data. In practice, I invited as many interviewees as possible to provide data to overcome this limitation. One possible solution in future studies, as I see it, would be to do more participant observations. In other words, the interview-based approach could be augmented by an ethnographic approach.

¹ Email interview with a deputy director, provincial branch of the national news agency, January 8, 2010.

5. EMBEDDING *GUANXI*: UNDERSTANDING MOBILE SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF CHINA¹

The swift proliferation of the mobile phone as a communication tool within the past decade has changed the information environment and facilitated interactivities in ways that earlier mass media have never been able to do (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling, 2004; Castells, Fernandez - Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007). The general nature of user-friendliness, affordability, accessibility, mobility, and intimacy that is imbedded in mobile communication has provided unprecedented opportunities for the development of interpersonal relationships and social networks (Fortunati, 2002; Ling, 2008; Knapik, 2008; Harvey, 2008). Importantly, technology penetration and application cannot be separated from concrete political, economic, and socio-cultural factors. As Jensen addresses, "...one fundamental issue is how new technologies are assimilated to specific political, economic, and cultural practices in a particular historical context, thus developing into resources with a characteristic social form" (Jensen, 1994: 338). Different contexts have accordingly shaped the characteristics of mobile phone-mediated interactions and mobile social network on different levels². Nevertheless, few scholarly studies have been carried out to investigate which cultural factors contribute to the characteristics of mobile interaction and mobile social networks, or how they do so, let alone how these factors shape the mobile social network into a

¹ A revised version of this chapter appears as Jun Liu (2010). Mobile Social Network in a Cultural Context, in: E. Canessa and M. Zennaro (eds.): *M-SCIENCE: Sensing, Computing and Dissemination*, Trieste: ICTP—The Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics, pp.211-240.

² For instance, the interpretation of "*keitai*" in Japan, see Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda (2005). The interpretations of "cell phone" in America and "mobile telephones" in Europe, see Jensen (2010) :108-110.

specific hotbed for [political] mobilization and participation (but see, e.g., Ito, et al., 2005; Ma, 2008; Goggin, 2008; Chu, Fortunati, Law, & Yang, 2012). This chapter aims at providing answers to some of these questions and further offering a necessary background to understanding the potential for [political] mobilization through mobile social networks by investigating the assimilation of mobile communication technologies in the culturally specific social network system in China.

Benefitting from the political and bureaucratic incentives in telecommunication network building, enormous market demands, low-cost handsets, and downward price on the usage of mobile phone¹, mobile devices, including the cellular phone (aka handset phone [*shouji*] in Chinese) and Little Smart (aka *Xiao Lingtong* in Chinese, see [Qiu, 2005; Wu, 2009:125-132]), have become popular in people's everyday lives in China. It is worth noting that since 2001, China has the largest number of mobile phone subscribers in the world, touching 1 billion at the end of February 2012 (Wang, 2002; Zhao, 2007; Xinhua, 2012). More than three quarters of the 1.3 billion Chinese people own a mobile phone today. The figures also mean that one in every five mobile phone users in the world is Chinese. More astoundingly, the national mobile phone SMS volume soared to 771.3 billion in 2009, a 770-fold increase within ten years (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology [MIIT], 2010 ; Zhiqiang, 2010). With a vast rural market still keen for basic communications, migrant workers desperate for extending family cohesion, and city slickers craving the up-to-date whizz-bang handsets, no wonder China is still enjoying a growth period in the mobile phone market. Research on mobile communication for social interactions in China typically focuses on the questions of telecommunication policies (Lynch, 2000; Qiu, 2007; Lu & Weber, 2007; Wu, 2009), rumors and gossip under highly-controlled

¹ For instance, the price of sending SMS in mainland China is the cheapest in the world. It costs 0.1 CNY (0.01 USD) for each one within the same telecom network. It is much cheaper if you choose a flat monthly SMS/MMS in a bundle.

situations (Yu, 2004; Tai & Sun, 2007; Ma, 2008), and the political implication of satiric SMS against authorities and bureaucracies (He, 2008). Yet, only a few have addressed “*guanxi*,” a cultural term relevant to understanding interpersonal relations and the social network system in Chinese society. By examining the spread of SARS- and war-related rumors via mobile phone and internet in China, Ma emphasizes specifically that the combination of technology convenience, media censorship, and *guanxi* in Chinese culture makes Chinese society a place that “tends to very easily become a warm bed for rumors” (Ma, 2008: 385). However, herein lies the dilemma: if *guanxi* penetrates Chinese people’s daily life, why does *guanxi* only appear in studies of rumors? If *guanxi* is a pervasive part of the everyday lives, how can the understanding of mobile phone interactions and mobile social networks be extended under the particular *guanxi* structures of Chinese society?

Aiming at offering a general overview of the socio-cultural characteristics of mobile networks in contemporary China as a background for further discussion on mobile-phone-facilitated popular protest and resistance, we, in this chapter, examine the social shaping of mobile communication under the influence of Chinese cultural values. To be more specific, *how does guanxi, a key cultural value in social interaction and social networks, contribute to the dynamics of Chinese mobile social networks?* Given the specific features of this cultural context, my goal is to sketch a framework for understanding the formation of what I called “*guanxi*-embedded mobile social networks” in China. I first introduce “*guanxi*,” the heavy reliance on interpersonal relationships in Chinese culture. Second, I specify case selection and data collection for the particular findings in this chapter. Third, I investigate the characteristics of *guanxi*-cohesive mobile social networks by looking at different cases where Chinese people use mobile communication to cultivate, maintain, and

strengthen *guanxi*, and further, breed new ways of social cohesion with mobile communication. The chapter at the end highlights and addresses the dynamics of *guanxi*-based mobile social networks that have emerged in China in the wake of wireless telephony communication. This study also provides another way of understanding how technology has been embedded in its social context (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1987), in contrast to several existing studies (e.g., Robison & Goodman, 1996; Zhao, 2007), which drew their conclusions ignoring influences from the distinctive Chinese *guanxi* culture.

5.1 UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF *GUANXI*

5.1.1 *Guanxi* in Chinese society

Guanxi, literally meaning “relation” or “personal connections,” stands for the endemic interpersonal relationships and social ties among various parties that make up a network and support one another in various Chinese milieus¹. As Yang defines it, *guanxi*

means literally “a relationship” between objects, forces, or persons. When it is used to refer to relationships between people, not only can it be applied to husband-wife, kinship and friendship relationships, it can also have the sense of “social connections,” dyadic relationships that are based implicitly (rather than explicitly) on mutual interest and benefit.

(Yang, 1994: 1)

¹ For *guanxi* researches in urban areas, see, for instance, Ruan (1993) and Bian (1994). For rural researches, see, for instance, Yan (1996).

Distinguished from the independent existence of the individual in Western thought, the nature of a person is “a relational being, socially situated and defined within an interactive context” (Bond & Hwang, 1986: 215) in a Chinese Confucian view. In other words, as Bian and Ang (1997: 984) elaborate, “[the] self is identified, recognized, and evaluated in terms of one’s relations to the groups and communities to whom one belongs.” Consequently, the individual in Chinese society is always considered an entity within a network of *guanxi*, the social ecology of relational interdependence.

In addition to personal identity, *guanxi* conjures up both personal ties and social networks (*shehui guanxi*, *guanxi wang*), the extended form of *guanxi*, with implicit claims on mutual emotional, interest, or benefit involvements. The most common bases for building *guanxi* include blood relation and spatial connections (e.g. friends, neighbors and classmates) (Kipnis, 1997; Kiong & Kee, 1998). So and Anthony (2006: 93) emphasize that people’s sense of self-worth depends on how well they deal with those related to them within their *guanxi* network. In this way, according to Fei, “the [Chinese] society is composed ...of overlapping networks of people linked together through differentially categorized social relationships” (Fei, 1992: 20). Regardless of an ever-changing set of social practices from pre-revolutionary, pre-reform to reform eras, in short, Chinese everywhere seem to rely heavily on *guanxi* to adapt themselves to the changing environment and strive for resources to satisfy their needs¹.

As a powerful lubricant to survival and success in Chinese society, *guanxi* has extended into political, economic, and social dimensions (Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002; Michailova & Hutchings, 2006). For instance, *guanxi* has been widely

¹ For instance, *guanxi* for migrant workers, see Hu (2008).

recognized by both Chinese and non-Chinese businessmen and investors as a key element to successful business (Pye, 1992; So & Anthony, 2006). Observed by Ruan in his 1986 survey in Tianjin, ordinary workers in enterprises must cultivate *guanxi* with officials who will “use their discretionary power in distributing goods, services and other benefits” (Ruan, 1993: 103). Yan also revealed that in rural communities *guanxi* exists “in its multiple functions in everyday life” (Yan, 1996: 8). Moreover, Yan notes that “one’s *guanxi* network covers all ramifications of life in the community, ranging from agriculture production and political alliances to recreational activities” (Yan, 1996: 9). That is why Chinese society should always be described as “*guanxi shehui*” (*guanxi*-based society). Due to “the strong relationship orientation of Chinese culture” (So & Anthony, 2006: 114), those who are introverted and incapable of cultivating and maintaining *guanxi* are as a result “relegated to socially disadvantaged positions” (Yan, 1996: 8).

5.1.2 Characteristics and application of *guanxi*

Always adapting itself to new institutional arrangement and functioning in a uniquely Chinese way, *guanxi* has three key characteristics (Yang, 1994; Bian, 1997).

First, *guanxi* takes root in familiarity or intimacy, which means the totality of personal connections rather than only being based on money. Connecting two people in a bond, *guanxi* also means that both sides must “know a great deal about each other and share with each other frequently” (Bian, 1997: 369). In other words, *guanxi* includes not only a utilitarian view of relationship but also *ganqing* (affection, attachment), the rapport of an emotional interpersonal relationship.

Second, *guanxi* carries reciprocal obligation. *Guanxi* usually develops between persons who are strongly tied to each other, and is a mutual obligation for both sides

to respond to requests for assistance. As a reciprocal process, *guanxi* not only stimulates endless circulations of favors and gifts (Yang, 1994; Yan, 1996), but also embeds itself within Chinese society to a far greater extent as “a dynamic process embedded in social interactions in everyday life” (Yang, 1994: 6; Yan, 1996: 4). If people fail to fulfill their obligations, they will be isolated, deprived, lose face (*mianzi*), even suffer the ultimate price of losing their *guanxi* networks and the social resources embedded in them (Hwang, 1987; Cheng & Rosett, 1992; Smart, 1993).

Reciprocity also means both sides will share each other’s social circles after they set up *guanxi*. Therefore, *guanxi* acts as an intermediary to tap into others’ social connections and resources. To do this, *guanxi* extends to *guanxi* networks, the intricacy of *guanxi* development and hidden rules of social interactions and network structures permeating Chinese society (Walder, 1986: Chapter Three and Five).

Third, and the most important characteristic of *guanxi* as I see it, is personal reliability. *Guanxi* involves not just material interest, but also various degrees of reliability of personal relations and social supports, including trustworthiness, solidarity, loyalty, and friendship, according to the degree of *guanxi* between people. For one thing, personal reliability accounts for the credibility of information exchange and effectively prohibits the occurrence of opportunism with, for example, false diplomas or certifications for education, training, and work experiences (Bian, 2002: 131). Also, the significance of *guanxi* had been reinforced in a Chinese environment that is characterized by inadequate social infrastructure, weak legal institutions which failed to provide “a trusted third party adjudication and enforcement of private agreements” (So & Anthony, 2006: 114), and “unpredictable risks of arbitrary bureaucratic intervention” (Smart, 1993: 404). For another, according to Yan’s anthropological work, the decline of social trust leads “one to trust only those

individuals in one's personal network and to behave in accordance with a particularistic morality" (Yan, 2009: 286). When rules are still not as important as personal relations, people in China always focus on the exceptionality of present circumstances and make their decisions and judgments "based on acquaintance or lack of acquaintance with others" (Michailova & Hutchings, 2006: 394) instead of resorting to law or other formal rules (Dunfee & Warren, 2001; Tung & Worm, 2001).

To initiate, maintain, and strengthen *guanxi* requires a huge amount of frequent interactions. On the one hand, social interactions, such as gift-giving, sometime easily conflated with bribery, corruption, and illegal payment, are required as an effective method to initiate *guanxi* and create a sense of long-term obligation for the recipients because "frequent contacts with each other foster understanding and emotional bonds" (So & Anthony, 2006: 8). On the other hand, "for the further development and maintenance of *guanxi*, conformity to *renqing* (favor, human feelings) rules, in particular, reciprocity and continued social interaction as well as the utilization of the *guanxi* relationship are essential" (So & Anthony, 2006: 8).

Despite the above efforts, most studies have failed to include *guanxi* in their analyses of the impacts of technological elements, for instance, the internet and mobile phone. Acknowledging the proliferation of mobile telecommunication infrastructure as a new grounding for interpersonal connections and social networking, this study responds to the need for an analytical focus on *guanxi* in the context of mobile technological innovation.

5.2 CASE SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

In this chapter I explore the relation between *guanxi* and mobile social networks through three prototypes of cases. This section deals with case selection criteria, a set of specific research questions in this chapter, and data collection. The elaborate answer will be provided in next section.

5.2.1 New Year SMS Greeting (“New Year SMS” for short)

The first type focuses on the exchange of greeting text messages during Spring Festival in China. Spring Festival, also known as Lunar New Year, is the most important and prevalent traditional Chinese holiday. Although many traditional parts of the celebration have disappeared or have been banned¹, the meaning of paying New Year calls remains unchanged. Greetings exchanged around holidays, in particular Spring Festival, keep people connected and strengthens their *guanxi*. The exchange of New Year greetings therefore is a useful means of measuring the composition of one’s *guanxi* network².

As the ubiquity of mobile devices increases, Chinese Spring Festival sees mobile messages flower. In addition to oral greetings to friends and relatives via a phone, the popularity of New Year SMS has overtaken visits to relatives and friends and sale of New Year Greeting Cards, developing into the best way to greet friends and family and spread the good cheer. A total of 23 billion short messages and 1.33 billion MMS were sent during the 2010 New Year Festival, with 13 billion on the first two-days alone, i.e. New year’s Eve and New Year’s Day (China Tech News, 2010). It means an average of 30.8 wireless messages had been sent per person based on 747 million mobile users. In the 2012 Chinese New Year holiday, SMS traffic was over 30 billion

¹ For example, New Year couplets pasted on gateposts or door panels and firecracker ban for safety issues.

² For an analysis of social networks by New Year visits, see Bian, Breiger, Deborah, & Galaskiewicz (2005).

messages, while in 2011, 2010, and 2009, the figures were 26 billion, 23 billion, and 19 billion messages respectively¹. Although people have criticized stylized messages as being devoid of human emotions compared with traditional door-to-door greeting, so many people tried to SMS on New Year's Eve that networks became jam-packed and many of the messages arrived hours late. Why do people's passions for New Year SMS exchange run high and rather than wane as the years pass? What is the relation between *guanxi* network and New Year text messages?

5.2.2 Mobile communication and job allocations for migrant workers

As the second type of cases, the allocation of jobs is a typical case that is often used to illustrate social networks². In China, job allocations play a central role in the everyday life of migrant workers (*nongmin gong*). Migrant workers are a floating population from less-developed central and western areas who move to more prosperous coastal areas and big cities in order to hunt for jobs (Li, 2004). By the end of 2008, the number of migrant workers was estimated at 225 million, or nearly 17.0% of the population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2009). The low-cost of ICT devices, including prepaid phone cards, Little Smart mobile phones, and cheap tariffs encourage mobile phone penetration among migrant workers. Data show that 72.9 percent of migrant workers own a mobile phone, which is much higher than the average mobile phone penetration rate in China in the same year—45.5 percent (Wang, 2007). My ethnographic survey in 2008 also demonstrates that, of the respondents in both urban and rural areas, over 90 percent had a mobile phone, which also reflects the popularization of the mobile phones among migrant workers (Liu, 2010: 846). The mass use of mobile services gives mobile phones a significant role in

¹ See the website of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the People's Republic of China (www.miit.gov.cn) for more details.

² For instance, see Granovetter (1974) and Bian (1997).

the migrant workers' daily life, including maintenance of emotional connections between geographically dispersed family members, formation of "translocal networks," organization of group scuffles, negotiation of romantic relationships, and transmission of job information (Cartier, Castells, & Qiu, 2005; Law & Peng, 2006; Law & Chu, 2008; Ngan & Ma, 2008; Lin & Tong, 2008; Liu, 2010).

Pursuing better job opportunities to earn more money and improve quality of life is central in many migrant workers' everyday lives. Provision of job information also plays a key role enabling local government to decrease unemployment rate and ensure social stability in urban areas. However, as several studies show, job information still mainly comes from the network of kinship, fellow-villagers and friends (Cartier, et al., 2005: 23; Qiu, 2008: 341-343). Recently the mobile phone has become an important part of this communication (Zhai, 2005; Ke, 2008; Qiu, 2008: 341-343). Indeed, local governments have built up various supporting systems, including SMS job alerts by local telecom service providers (SPs) as one of the most important elements, to spread job information and help migrant workers find work (Ye, 2010). Compared with job information within groups of migrant workers, SMS job alerts have advantages in both quality and quantity. One may ask, however, how migrant workers feel about mobile phone-spread job messages from their *guanxi* network and those from local SPs? What are the characteristics of mobile social networks among migrant workers?

5.2.3 Rumors via mobile network

The third type examines mobile phone rumors and *guanxi* networks during the 2003 SARS epidemic (Xu & Yan, 2003; Xia & Ye, 2003; Liu, 2003; Yan & Xu, 2004) and the 2010 Shanxi earthquake panic (Wang & Sun, 2010). With the growing popularity

of mobile devices, mobile communication platforms have increasingly become a giant rumor mill in China¹ (e.g., Wang & Sun, 2010; Bristow, 2012). As we already mentioned in Chapter One, the widespread rumor message via *mobile phones* about “fatal viruses appear in Guangzhou” during the 2003 SARS epidemic has resulted in large scale panic shopping for vinegar, masks, and Chinese herbal medicines not only in Guangzhou, but all across China. The rumor case during the 2003 SARS epidemic accordingly becomes a prototype event to investigate not just how [mobile phone] rumors influence the country’s socio-political order, but also how mobile communication platforms have changed or shaped rumor dissemination. Since 2003, moreover, rumors via mobile network have played an increasingly role in initiating mass panic, stirring up disturbances, and even triggering mass incidents². The case of earthquake rumor in Shanxi, as we demonstrated in the methodology chapter, is clearly another example of mobile phone rumors in contemporary China. Specifically, the word “rumors” here refers to messages denounced by government and expertise agencies, for instance, medical institutions in 2003 and earthquake bureaus in 2010 (Xue, Tian, & Li, 2003; Lv & Wang, 2010). Why do people believe mobile rumors instead of clarifications from governments? In particular, how do people consider mobile phone rumors and their social network? The case study shows a relation between mobile phone rumors and *guanxi* network.

5.2.4 Data

The specific data for this chapter are interviews carried out between 2003 and 2011.

The first study on “New Year SMS” is based on over 30 face-to-face, telephone and web semi-structured interviews with mobile subscribers in Beijing, Shanghai,

¹ For the discussion exclusively on mobile phone rumor in China, see Chapter Six.

² For instance, Weng’an mass incident in 2008 (Los Angeles Times, 2008; Reuters, 2008; Xinhuanet, 2008; Ding, 2008).

Guangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan and Fuzhou during Spring Festivals in 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2009. The framework of the interview included:

- Demographic data, including age, gender, education, career, socio-economic status and mobile phone usage time.

- Behavioral data on New Year SMS practices such as how many SMS they send during the seven-day Spring Festival vacation, when, to whom, and why? Are there any personal experiences or stories about New Year SMS? Our interviewees always found it difficult to provide the accurate number of text messages they sent and received during the Spring Festival period. Instead, I asked the interviewees to estimate the number of New Year SMS according to the receipts from telecom service providers and then to compare the list of SMS senders and receivers with their *guanxi* network. Neither the lists of senders nor those of receivers represent the whole *guanxi* network of one person. For example, a teacher recalled that he never sent any SMS greeting back to his students because “the students are not within [his] *guanxi* network.”¹ Nonetheless greetings via mobile network “cover a majority of [people’s] *guanxi* network.”²

- Attitudinal data: viewpoints towards New Year SMS.

To explore migrant workers’ mobile phone use and their job searches in the second type case, I hired two assistants to organize two focus groups of migrant workers in Fuzhou in May and August 2008. Each group consisted of eight people. We went to four labor markets for migrant workers and five selected companies which had over 50% migrant workers amongst their total workforce from rural and urban areas³. The selection procedure used a snowball sampling protocol. Next, participation took

¹ Interview with a 28-year-old university lecturer, Fuzhou, February 2010.

² Interviews with mobile phone users in Beijing and Fuzhou, February 2010.

³ Of the job markets, two in urban and two in rural areas. Of the companies, one in urban and four from rural areas. For a detail information of companies, see Liu (2010): note 32.

voluntary principles. We obtained detailed information about the use of mobile phone in exchanging job information from personal observation and interviews. We then carried out interviews in interviewees' workplaces and asked them to talk freely on the basis of their experiences of job allocations and, in particular, the use of mobile phones, encouraging a full, meaningful answer using the subject's own knowledge and/or feelings.

Third, I conducted the study of "mobile phone rumors" using in-depth interviews with 17 mobile phone users, six in Guangzhou during the 2003 SARS epidemic and eleven in Shanxi Province between January and February, 2010¹. Two additional things worth mentioning are earthquake rumors. First, after the magnitude 6.8 earthquake in Sichuan in 2008, rumors appeared about new earthquakes. These rumors ran rampant and created large-scale social panics, for instance, in Beijing, Tianjin, Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi province, Henan province and elsewhere in China (Yan, 2010). Second, earthquake rumors appeared twice in Shanxi in 2010 (Xinhuonet, 2010; *China Daily*, 2010). On January 24, an actual quake in Yuncheng county of Shanxi province happened after national and local earthquake bureaus dispelled the first earthquake rumors. As a result, when the identical rumors returned a month later, in February, for a second round, the earthquake rumors sparked a more far-reaching public panic in Shanxi. To separate the influences from mobile networks from the specific earthquake scare, I focus on people's attitudes toward the messages from mobile communication channel rather than the content of the information. I also ask respondents whether or not they have forwarded rumor messages, if so, how many, to whom, when and by what reasons.

¹ I carried out "telephone interviews" with residents in Shanxi case.

5.3 GUANXI AND MOBILE COMMUNICATION IN CHINA

5.3.1 New Year SMS and *guanxi* network

During my interviews, New Year SMS were seen as the best, low-cost way to convey people's New Year wishes and greetings. Each respondent had sent greeting SMS for at least three years in the seven-day Festival vacation, particularly on New Year's Eve. Of the respondents, 92.3% (24 of 26) stated that they mostly favored SMS greeting via mobile network when asked about their greeting activities.

The data show that the New Year SMS greetings reinforce *guanxi*. All of my respondents noted that New Year SMS had an active role in keeping and strengthening their personal *guanxi* and *guanxi* network. As one respondent notes, "there is nothing more important than sending greeting SMS at the proper time in the New Year's Eve, not too early, not too late."¹ With regard to greeting SMS, it is a convenient and *implicit* way to say "I remember you on this specific day. I would like to send you my best wishes. You are a very important person in my personal *guanxi* network."² Therefore, on the one hand, for the people you always contact, New Year SMS means greetings at the specific time to show that you have appreciated their help and friendship in the past year. On the other hand, for those friends with whom correspondence was irregular, greeting messages implicitly tell them that they are not forgotten.

Furthermore, the connotation of a New Year SMS is more complicated than it appears. First of all, selecting receivers is neither a random process nor a simple inclusion of all the names in a person's mobile phone directory. The process means

¹ Interview with a 45-year-old civil servant, Beijing, February 2007.

² Interview with a 45-year-old civil servant, Beijing, February 2007.

“to choose the person with whom you have a *guanxi* and a level of intimacy.”¹ As one explains, “the higher-ups and the person who helped you in the past years should be the first and foremost one to receive the greetings.”² Second, it is also an act showing regard for these people. “The earlier you send the messages [in the New Year’s Eve] to someone who has meant a lot to you, the bigger impression you will leave on them. Because people will get tired later with hundreds of greeting SMS coming from other friends.”³ In particular, as one added, “you can mention implicitly in the SMS the help you get from the person, this can remind your receivers that you are still keeping good memories of what they have done for you. Then they will appreciate your thought.”⁴ That becomes a useful way to nurture and further strengthen *guanxi* between sender and receiver.

It is also a sense of achievement when you send hundreds of greeting SMS, “because it shows that you have abundant *guanxi* and social resources.”⁵ A staff member in a local telecom company sent over 350 SMS greetings on New Year Eve’s in each of the past four years. As he explained, “it is cheaper for telecom staff to send SMS. More importantly, sending New Year SMS offers you a chance to consider how much *guanxi* you still have, and how much *guanxi* you would like to maintain.”⁶ To do so, New Year SMS exchange provides the best way to map one’s *guanxi* network.

On the other hand, *guanxi* suffers when the receiver does not return the greeting. As one explained,

¹ Telephone interview with a 24-year-old white-collar worker in Shanghai, February 2005.

² Online interview with a 34-year-old journalist in Xiamen, February 2008.

³ Online interview with a 27-year-old editor in Xiamen, February 2008.

⁴ Interview with a 45-year-old civil servant, Beijing, February 2007.

⁵ Interview with a 43-year-old white collar, Fuzhou, February 2009.

⁶ Interview with the director of the news center, Fujian Branch China Unicom Corporation Limited, Fuzhou, February 2009.

That may lead me to think about what happened between us. Is there anything wrong between us? But in the long run, I may choose not to send greetings to this person in the next holiday. The absent mutual greetings at least showed that our *guanxi* is not as strong as I thought, or the person does not respect me so much.¹

Moreover, according to one respondent, “I will regard the people who do not send back their SMS greetings as a penny-pinching person. They did not want to send an SMS of 0.1 CNY, so are unlikely to help me in future.”² Here, the absence of exchanging greetings through New Year SMS has been considered as a lack of reciprocity in *guanxi*.

Against this backdrop, people feel “guilty” when they forget to send a New Year SMS, or are unsure whether or not they have already done it. One respondent recalled:

I once unintentionally forgot to send an SMS greeting on New Year’s Eve to one of my friends. Then I got an SMS [greeting] from her. I immediately felt guilty, guessing that she maybe regarded me as taking no account of her. I therefore chose one SMS with special greetings and sent to her with my apology³.

“Being the first to send the greeting SMS,” as a result, has an implication: “to me, you are a much more important friend and I am really concerned with you as I am sending my greetings before you do so to me.”⁴ Another respondent also remembered

¹ Interview with a 45-year-old civil servant, Beijing, February 2007.

² Interview with a 55-year-old journalist, Beijing, February 2007.

³ Interview with a 22-year-old student, Fuzhou, February 2009.

⁴ Interviews with mobile phone users, Beijing, Fuzhou, and Shanghai, 2005, 2008, and 2009.

that one of her friends asked her after the vacation that “did you receive my [greeting] message? I did not receive yours.” She felt embarrassed because she cannot remember exactly whether or not she has sent. She chose to lie to her friend and said “yes, yes, yes. I also sent my regard to you. Did not you receive that? Maybe it is because of the SMS jam [that you did not get my feedback].” This respondent explained to me that “it is not a deliberate lie. Because I do not want to disappoint my friend, no matter I forgot to send her SMS greetings or my message had been jammed.” In addition to the easy, fast, trendy, and also cost effective advantages of SMS, the obligations in *guanxi* therefore implicitly play a central role in the exponential volume of Chinese New Year SMS, as people feel the necessity to send greetings to everyone who might send to them in their *guanxi* networks.

To summarize, wireless telecommunication technology brings the blessings of a new approach, as well as a means of modernization in maintaining and strengthening *guanxi*. In the context of China, mobile communication does not merely entail a convenient way of exchanging greetings but also facilitates the formation of *guanxi*-embedded social connections. The staggering volume of SMS greetings indicates the size of receivers’ *guanxi* network, or “social capital” (Bourdieu, 1986; Gold, et al., 2002: 7), because everyone within the network is obligated to reply the greetings. Consequently, maintaining and strengthening *guanxi* lies at the heart of exchanging New Year SMS. Through mobile communication, during holidays in particular, people greet each other, maintain and nurture their *guanxi* network, and build up “a real virtuality integrated with other forms of interaction in an increasingly hybridized everyday life” (Castells, 2009: xxix).

5.3.2 Job allocations, *guanxi* and mobile network

As a convenient way to spread and receive information, mobile communication also provides migrant workers with most of their job information, and further increases their social and geographical mobility. As one respondent said,

after I arrived in this city, all the information about my three jobs came from my friends and townees via my mobile phone. Twice I got information via SMS and once through calling. I also shared [job] information [via the mobile network] with my friends and relatives.¹

Another respondent added that

We always exchange job information via our mobile phones. It is hard for yourself alone to find a job in a strange city. You have to depend on your relatives, friends and, in a word, [your] *guanxi* network. Getting up-to-date information also enhances our competitiveness. The mobile phone is a convenient tool to achieve that goal².

Importantly, migrant workers prefer job information which comes from their *guanxi* network to that which comes from service providers and local government. All interviewees knew about the SMS job alerts network supported by the local telecom services. While 10 received job information from telecom services, only two used that information.

¹ Interview with a 22-year-old home delivery staff, Fuzhou, April 2008.

² Interview with a 21-year-old porter, Fuzhou, April 2008.

Why did they ignore or even “immediately delete”¹ job information from the government? A typical answer during our observation and interviews is “I do not have the ability to judge real or fake job information [from telecom servicers]. And I trust those messages from my friends, relatives and townees.”² One of our interviewees added that “we do not mean that the information [from government] is fake. But messages from [our] *guanxi* network are more reliable [to us].”³ Personal connections from *guanxi*-embedded mobile communication mean that the information obtained is given high credibility.

This practice of job allocations in China is distinct from Granovetter’s “strength-of-weak-ties” argument (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1995, 2005). In his classic studies of job-seekers’ networks, Granovetter emphasized the importance of “weak ties” (of group with low intimacy or infrequent interaction) as an access to “information and resources beyond those available in their [people’s] own social circles” (Granovetter, 1982: 114). However, as Bian’s fieldwork of job assignments in China shows, *guanxi*, no matter the direct or indirect ties of exchange relations, facilitates “strong ties of trust and obligation” (Bian, 1997: 367) with personal influence. As a result, in job searching activities, Chinese people, first and foremost, locate a “personal helper” (Bian, 1997: 380) or “individual control agency” (Bian, 1997: 371) within their *guanxi* network, or seek to build up indirect ties through their existing *guanxi* network. If you do not have *guanxi*, your job application would most probably fail even though you have the correct information. In contrast, a different scenario with *guanxi* was identified empirically by Bian (1997) where the “strong ties” of job-seekers’ *guanxi* network was even used to influence job-control authorities. In this way, information, the key element in “strength-of-weak-ties,” becomes “only a by-product of influence

¹ Interview with a 22-year-old home delivery staff, Fuzhou, May 2008.

² Interview with a 32-year-old housemaid, Fuzhou, May 2008.

³ Interview with a 42-year-old porter, Fuzhou, May 2008.

received” (Bian, 1997: 371) in *guanxi* network. Instead, the experiences and influence from social relationships play a crucial role in the process of mutual communication.

Generally speaking, both trust and reciprocal obligation embedded in the strong ties of *guanxi* network play pivotal roles in information diffusion among migrant workers’ job allocations. On the one hand, as Zhai found out, “reliable information always comes from individuals [who build up *guanxi*]. On the contrary, social institutions usually spread unreliable information” (Zhai, 2005: 113). As a migrant worker receives more identical message from one’s *guanxi*-embedded mobile network, the information gains higher credibility. As the information increases in credibility, the message disseminates wider and faster. As one respondent stressed, “if you always keep [job] information to yourself and never share it with others, how you can expect other people to help you? How can you build up your *guanxi*?”¹ Another respondent agreed that “when we share job information, we are following a well-known Chinese saying: ‘sharing the fortune and bearing the hardship together.’² We will strengthen our *guanxi* network and get more reliable information from each other.”³ Consequently, information duplication, the enemy of information diversity in “strength-of-weak-ties” argument, provides reliable information in migrant workers’ job-seeking activities. That is why migrant workers pay less attention to governmental SMS job alerts, even when the information is true.

Three features distinguish migrant workers’ job-search activities with *guanxi*-embedded mobile communication. First, migrant workers actively exchange and share job information via their mobile networks. In this way, mobile phone-mediated *guanxi* networks among migrant workers resemble the social networks of migrant workers, playing a key role in migration living and their job searching. Second, the *guanxi*-

¹ Interview with a 32-year-old nanny, Fuzhou, May 2008.

² “Share and share alike” in English.

³ Interview with a 22-year-old home delivery staff, Fuzhou, April 2008.

embedded mobile connection illustrates the heavy reliance of migrant workers on mobile phones in their job searching. Third, mobile phone networks embody migrant workers' *guanxi* and social network. On the one hand, SMS information duplication increases the credibility of messages. On the other hand, mutual obligations promote identical messages flow within *guanxi* network, and in turn, enhance mutual dependence.

5.3.3 *Guanxi* networks and mobile phone rumors

The last case to be considered here is the phenomenon of mobile phone rumors. During the 2003 SARS epidemic, mobile phone rumors proliferated throughout China after SARS hysteria popped up in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and elsewhere. One version of the rumors asserted that fumigating rooms with boiling vinegar could kill SARS germs and prevent the spread of pneumonia. Another claimed that *Ban Lan Gen* (isatis), a kind of Chinese herb, can enhance the body immune system, and particularly, ward off SARS. Mobile rumors triggered widespread panic buying of vinegar and *Ban Lan Gen* as effective SARS-deterrents. Many supermarkets soon ran out of vinegar, while local herbalists also reported brisk trade on items of herbal medicine.

Another theme in SMS rumors is earthquakes. In the early spring of 2010, panic arose in several cities in Shanxi province as a text message claimed that an earthquake was about to strike Shanxi. Earth experts tried to dispel the rumors through local media, vowing that they did not predict a “destructive earthquake” in the near future. Instead of blowing over, earthquake rumors emerged as a constant in conversations, mobile chats and in instant messaging. One of the mobile rumors said that “there will be an earthquake before 6 am tomorrow around the areas of Yuci and Taiyuan. Please

be sure to pay attention to [earthquake]. Please forward this to your friends. Bear in mind!”¹ Propelled by mobile texts and the Internet, public fear of an imminent earthquake in Shanxi intensified and the panic became palpable. Around 3 a.m. in the night of February 21, thousands of citizen in different cities in Shanxi were walking down the streets and squares, some people with canes in their hands, anxiously waiting for “the predicted earthquake” (Wang & Sun, 2010). As one respondent described on the next day, “all of Shanxi was sleepless last night.”² Even though local governments and public security bureaus refuted the rumors, few responded and went back home. How and why did these mobile rumors spark worry and disturbances in society?

One respondent recalled that

...my colleagues texted the messages to me, saying that vinegar and *Ban Lan Gen* function as prophylactic measures of SARS. Lots of my relatives, including my parents, received several mobile texts and callings in similar content. Actually I am not fully convinced by this information. But I still followed what the message said, meanwhile forwarded it [to my close friends and relatives]³.

This statement demonstrates that both the mutual trust and support in the bilateral relations within *guanxi* contribute to messages with high credibility. In the SARS case, all respondents forwarded this kind of information, either via calling or through text messages, to their relatives, colleagues, and friends. As one explained,

¹ Telephone interviews with residents in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, January and February 2010.

² Telephone interviews with residents in Shanxi, 2010. Also see Wang & Sun (2010).

³ Interview with a 22-year-old journalist, Guangzhou, March 2003.

Although there are some doubts over the curative effects [of vinegar and herbs], I am quite sure that my friends and relatives will neither lie to me nor hurt me. So I believe [the message]. I also forward mass text messages to my friends and relatives, because I hope to remind them [of this possible way to prevent SARS]. And it is convenient to send bulk SMS via mobile communication.¹

It is clear here that, through mobile communication, stable reciprocity among people emerges readily by disseminating messages that they perceive as relevant to those within their *guanxi* network.

We find similar reactions to mobile rumors of earthquakes. Even though some people remained in doubt about the authenticity of the rumors, few hesitated to transmit such messages. One respondent admitted that “the more mobile text messages I get about earthquake, the more scared I become” because all these messages come from “people I trust, including my relatives and close friends.”² Many hastened out of their houses in a great rush while still calling their relatives and friends “to rush to open spaces” as “these people mean a lot to me.”³

If the SARS epidemic is the first time mobile phone rumors sparked public panic, mobile rumors related to natural disasters, including earthquakes and acid rain⁴, have frequently been spread. In particular, the “high credibility” of mobile phone messages obtained through *guanxi* networks does not mean that people take for granted that the information from their *guanxi* network is true. To be sure, as in the case of the mobile rumors on earthquake, it is almost impossible for any person to make the judgment

¹ Interview with a 32-year-old civil servant, Guangzhou, March 2003.

² Telephone Interview with a 35-year-old engineer, Taiyuan, February 2010.

³ Telephone Interview with a 25-year-old university student, Taiyuan, February 2010.

⁴ For instance, mobile rumors about “severe acid rains contain Icelandic volcanic ash” in April, 2010, see Li & Zhao (2010).

between fact and falsehood. A combination of trustworthiness and reciprocal obligation from *guanxi* puts aside the fact and highlights the perceived reliability of the near friend, or as one respondent argues “it’s better to believe it than not, especially when messages are coming from the people you trust.”¹ In a word, both reliability and obligation characteristics of *guanxi* network and the instantaneity (calling and text messaging), synchronism (calling) and wide circulation (text messaging) characteristics of mobile communications contribute to continuous spreading of rumors of alleged credibility in Chinese society.

5.4 GUANXI-EMBEDDED MOBILE SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THEIR POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.4.1 *Guanxi*-embedded mobile social network in China

Both theoretically and empirically, this chapter examines the dynamics of *guanxi* in a Chinese society teeming with mobile connectedness. The ubiquity of mobile phone coverage in China has not only influenced the way Chinese people interact with each other in interpersonal communication, but has also produced a revolutionary transformation of the styles of *guanxi* and *guanxi* networks.

First, by investigating patterns of calling and SMS activities, we observe that mobile communication plays an increasing role in keeping in touch with people from the same locality, or with similar age, socioeconomic status, stage in the life-cycle, and life-style. Due to the technical capabilities of wireless telephony, urban and rural residents participate in *guanxi*-embedded mobile phone interactions of various kinds during their everyday life, from festival wishes to daily greetings, and from job search

¹ Telephone Interview with a 35-year-old engineer, Taiyuan, February 2010.

assistance to emergency contacts. In other words, Chinese people have not only adopted the mobile phone, but they have also harnessed its assets by integrating mobile devices into their *guanxi* practice. Mobile social networks have therefore established themselves as an *implicit* substitute of traditional *guanxi* networks in the everyday lives of Chinese people.

Second, embracing the characteristics of *guanxi* in Chinese culture, in particular mutual reliability and reciprocal obligation, mobile messages enjoy high credibility. Further, the combination of high-credibility information and high-efficiency technology encourages the proliferation of identical messages within mobile social networks in a short time. In a circular fashion, the credibility of a message expands its dissemination in mobile social network, and the high-efficiency dissemination in turn increases the credibility of the message and pushes more and more people to forward it. This process is both positive and negative. On the one hand, it keeps citizens informed in spite of media censorship in China. On the other hand, it may make mobile phone users credulous towards the messages they receive via mobile social network as they are unable to make judgments based on reason or facts. That is why mobile phone rumors can easily trigger social disturbances in contemporary Chinese society.

In short, mobile social networks in China feature not only the technical characteristics of mobile telephony, but also *guanxi*, a distinguishing characteristic of Chinese culture. As *guanxi*-embedded mobile social networks are integrated into Chinese people's routines, the omnipresent mobile communication articulates *guanxi*-based interpersonal relationships and social networks, reformulating a cultural model of meaning in which ultimate meaning is defined less by the content than by the senders and their *guanxi* with receivers. In China's new, fast-paced environment,

mobile-phone-mediated *guanxi* networks therefore have become more entrenched than ever, heavily influencing Chinese political landscapes, social behavior, and commercial practice.

5.4.2 Political implication of *guanxi* network

While descriptions of *guanxi* are plenty, those purporting to explain or even just make sense of its existence as a way of social support and political mobilization are relatively scarce, if inspirational. As Yan's investigations in rural communities show, local residents came into conflict with local cadres and won the battle by mobilizing *guanxi*, their personal networks as a defense mechanism (Yang, 1994; Yan, 1996). The spatial-based campus environment, specifically the dormitory-based student networks, played a key role in facilitating ideas and information about movement activities during the early stages of the 1989 Beijing Student Movement (Zhao, 1998: 1504). Frequent chatting among students of the same or nearby dormitories also nurtured the friendship networks necessary for student mobilization. In contemporary rural contentions, kinship and acquaintance mobilization has become a new way of organization (Shan & Jiang, 2009; Shan, 2010). Understanding *guanxi*-embedded mobile social network in the cultural context of China allows us to further study mobile phone-mediated popular protests on a large scale and to focus on the occurrence of both normal and anomalous events. In next chapter, I elaborate on an emerging form of *online* public resistance on the basis of *guanxi*-embedded mobile social networks—the mobile phone rumor.

6. MOBILE PHONE RUMORS AS NONVIOLENT

RESISTANCE

—RUMOR COMMUNICATION, CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, AND THE COUNTER-PUBLIC SPHERE

6.1 DEMONIZATION OF RUMOR IN CHINA

Rumor is a noteworthy phenomenon that has attracted considerable and ongoing attention from various fields within the humanities and social sciences, including psychology (Knapp, 1944; Allport & Postman, 1948; Rosnow & Fine, 1976), social psychology (Bordia & DiFonzo, 2004), sociology (Peterson & Gist, 1951; Shibutani, 1966; Morin, 1971), political sciences (Layman & Green, 2005), and communication (Rosnow, 1988; Pendleton, 1998; Harsin, 2006). Studies of rumor have also been conducted across different historical periods, societies, and cultures (Kapferer, 1990; Neubauer, 1999; Lv, 2011). In particular, rumor has played a specific political role in the Chinese context throughout the ages (for a historical overview, see Qi [2005]). Historically, rumor has become an indispensable means of reacting against authoritarian control over and ruthless suppression of free speech and opinion (Qi, 2005). It satirizes the ruling class, reveals political struggles, expresses grassroots discontent, and may even stimulate large-scale uprisings and rebellions (Lv, 2003; Qi, 2005; Haar, 2006; Lv, 2011). For instance, landless peasants weaponized a rumor as part of the “the Yellow Turban Rebellion” (184-205 AD) against the Han (206 BC-220 AD) government’s burdensome taxes and rampant corruption. This rumor

proclaimed that “the firmament has already perished; the Yellow Sky will soon rise,” which served as an indication that the Han ruler had lost his heavenly mandate, and the Yellow Turban Army was about to take his place. The proliferation of rumors about the Manchu-dominated Qing government hunting down and killing Han soldiers not only magnified the discontent and escalated the Manchu-Han conflicts but, more importantly, it led up to the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, which finally overthrew the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China (Huang, 2005).

To snuff out dissent and ensure political stability, authorities in different periods have strived to crack down on rumor-mongering and prevent rumors from circulating. In particular, rulers normally emphasize the false, fabricated, defamatory, and irrational nature of rumors to guarantee the legitimacy in their anti-rumor actions. Against this background, the accusation of “spreading rumors to mislead people” (谣言惑众) or “fabricating rumors to erupt disturbances” (造谣生事) has become an excuse for political suppression and persecution (Lv, 2003). One historical example is from an enormous Chinese sorcery scare of 1768. Political suppression including arrests and imprisonment of people who spoke out against the government occurred in the name of eradicating the so-called “‘soulstealers’ rumor,” which decorously shielded the regime’s brutal investigation and its arbitrary conviction, detention, and execution of those who committed “political crime,” which included “sedition in all its various guises, whether religious heterodoxy, literary innuendo, or outright revolt” (Kuhn, 1990: 187).

Likewise, stamping out rumors to ensure regime stability remains a crucial method for political control in contemporary China (Ministry of Public Security, 1988; Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2006). The strategies adopted include naming rumor as “a ‘new-style’ political weapon” (Smith, 2006; Chen, 2011)

by certain foreign forces as a way to attack the leadership of the Communist Party, drawing colorful parallels between rumors and “pornography, gambling and drugs” (Chen, 2011), or endowing rumor-mongering with a counter-revolutionary initiative (Smith, 2006) or “an ulterior motive”—it is portrayed as disturbing the social order, disrupting public security, or even inciting to overthrow state power (Ministry of Public Security, 1988; Zhang, 2010; Hu, 2011). Accordingly, it is no surprise that rumor has been viewed as a “necromantic delusion” (妖言) (Lv, 2003; China Youth International, 2011), a *public nuisance*, or even “a malignant tumor” (Chen, 2011; Forsythe, 2011) in society, resulting in “discredit to the innocent and caus[ing] panic or even social unrest if not clarified in time” (Chen, 2011). Spreading rumor therefore has become an ethical and politically unacceptable practice in official discourse.

Furthermore, the demonization of rumor coincides with a too-broad use of this term by authorities for the sake of being in power. Lacking a clear definition, as Smith (2006: 408) discloses, “...the authorities considered ‘rumor’ to be any information or opinion at variance with the official construction of reality.” Much more perturbing is the fact that, as portrayed in official accounts and media reports, every mass protest is attributed as the tragic outcome of “a few rumormongers with ulterior motives, taking advantage of the many being ignorant of the truth” and “rumors have played a damaging role in every incident” (*China Daily*, 2009). In this way, the ruling party legitimizes activities of cracking down on the rumor mill through law and regulation. According to *the Law of the PRC on Penalties for Administration of Public Security*, which entered into force on March 1, 2006, rumor-mongering has been categorized as an activity that intentionally incites public disturbances, which equals activities of disinformation concerning any risk situation, epidemic disease or emergency (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2006). Accordingly, public

security organs have since launched surveillance and investigations to search out and arrest rumor-mongers, quash rumors, and eliminate their “pernicious effects” on social and political stability (*Beijing Daily Messenger*, 2003; Li, 2005: 197-199; Smith, 2006: 409-411).

Although Chinese authorities have tried hard to eradicate rumor, rumors spring up one after another, frequently putting the whole society in a state of anxiety (Li, 2005; Smith, 2006, 2008; Pan, 2008: 202; Li, 2011; Wu, 2011). On the front lines of this movement, new media platforms, including mobile devices, online forums, and twitter-like *Weibo* sites, have quickly become the most relevant rumor-mongering machines China has ever seen (Wang & Sun, 2010; Bristow, 2012). Frequent internet and mobile-phone-based rumor emergencies affect the country, turning it into “the people’s Republic of Rumors” (Larson, 2011), aggravating social tensions, and evoking collective actions in recent years (Chen & Pan, 2006; Ding, 2008). *How and why do rumors, in particular those via mobile media platforms, exist and increase in the face of authoritarian surveillance and suppression, even flaring up after official denial of rumors?* Understanding mobile phone rumors, among many other things, offers not just “a useful insight into popular attitudes and mood” (Smith, 2006: 407), but also a key approach to reveal deep-seated structural problems in contemporary Chinese society (Li, 2005; Zhou, 2010; Young, 2011). More important, it provides a specific angle to deepen and broaden our understanding of the use of the mobile phone in contemporary China.

This chapter puts mobile phone rumor into context and investigates its role, characteristics, and implications in contemporary China. I first propose a theoretical framework for considering rumor as a form of unofficial communication and then formulate research questions for this chapter with specific emphasis on the

technological and cultural features of rumor communication via mobile phones in China. Second, I describe six cases of mobile phone rumors in both urban and rural China. Third, I investigate the distinctive features of rumors via mobile phones. Fourth, I analyze the spreading of mobile phone rumors with the goal of excavating the social and political dynamics that shape the ways in which rumors proliferate. Fifth, I summarize mobile phone rumor as an emerging form of *online* public resistance in contentious politics in contemporary China.

6.2 RUMOR AS UNOFFICIAL COMMUNICATION

6.2.1 Rumor as unofficial communication

Although there is no universal consensus of what rumor is in the humanities and social sciences, two overall definitions have been given in previous studies. One treats rumor as a kind of message (Peterson & Gist, 1951; Berenson, 1952; Morin, 1971; Kapferer, 1990; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007b) or proposition (Knapp, 1944; Allport & Postman, 1948; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Rosnow, 1980), while the other describes rumor as a form of communication (Shibutani, 1966; Rosnow, 1988; Kapferer, 1990; for overview, see Fleub [1962]). The former tends to regard rumor as a false, unverified, or even distorted piece of information, which easily results in the simplified view of rumor as misinformation or even disinformation (Knapp, 1944; Allport & Postman, 1948; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Kapferer, 1990; Sunstein, 2009). Additionally, as studies scrutinize, this formulation leads scholars to focusing on the questions of rumor's content, reference, and variance, regardless of its particular social setting and/or circumstances (Neubauer, 1999). The latter, on the contrary, views rumor as an essential part of collective problem-solving process through dozens

of communicative acts, which goes beyond “any particular set of words” (Shibutani, 1966: 16; Kapferer, 1990: 50). Specifically, in his influential sociological study of rumors, Shibutani defines rumor as “a recurrent form of *communication through which men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources*” [italics in original] (Shibutani, 1966: 17).

Human beings generate rumor as “improvised news” through “a collective transaction” to cope with uncertainties of life when the formal communication channel fails to provide them with badly needed or trustworthy information. More importantly, “the transformation of rumor content—usually called ‘distortion’—is actually part of the developmental process through which men strive for understanding and consensus” (Shibutani, 1966: 17).

Therefore, “...falsehood is not a necessary feature of rumor” (Shibutani, 1966: 17, also see Neubauer [1999]: 3) and “[r]umor is not so much distortion of some word combination but what is held in common.” Additionally, “[t]o focus attention upon words, then, is to misplace emphasis” (Shibutani, 1966: 16, also see Pendleton [1998]: 70; Donovan [2007]).

Taking rumor as a form of communication not only reformulates the understanding of rumor beyond a falsehood with deleterious effect, but also provides a broader theoretical framework for understanding rumor as a kind of collective action that aims at giving meaning to unexplained phenomena and events through communicative activities. Rumor therefore forms unofficial communication outside the established system of communication, or what people commonly call “the institutional channel,” while developing “a rumor public” (Peterson & Gist, 1951: 160) that has been made up by collective sharing of a common object of attention in the same ambiguous

situation (Shibutani, 1966: 31-62). As a result, consideration should be given to both the dynamics of rumor as unofficial communication and the formation of a rumor public with common interest in an issue or event through rumor diffusion (Peterson & Gist, 1951: 167; Fleub, 1962).

6.2.2 Reinvestigating mobile phone rumors in contemporary China

Given the above discussion, this chapter considers rumor via mobile phone as unofficial communication and, further, a form of collective action in contemporary China. Against this backdrop, I examine how mobile technology shapes rumor as *unofficial communication and its implications* in contemporary China. More specifically, this chapter explores how mobile-technologically shaped communicative means (i.e., the mobile phone) affects rumor in a specific socio-political context (i.e., China) in two ways: first, it looks at how mobile technology shapes rumor and its diffusion; second, it analyzes the role and implication of mobile phone rumors. Through combining these two aspects, this study looks beyond mobile phone rumors to delve into the question of how people use mobile devices to *initiate, facilitate, and proliferate* unofficial communication in contemporary China.

Here, it is necessary to address the following two points that are mutually intertwined and further influence mobile phone rumor in China: (a) the technological characteristics of the communication channel; and (b) the impact of culture on the communication network.

Communication channels affect how rumors are spread; Shibutani once stressed the role of media in rumor diffusion:

Communication channels, then, are much more than mere points of contact; they consist of *shared understandings concerning who may address whom, about what subject, under what circumstances, with what degree of confidence*. [italics in original]

(Shibutani, 1966: 21)

In a mediated society, technologies are having huge impacts on media—the communication channels—after the emergence of the technologically reproduced means of mass communication, especially digital-technology-facilitated interaction and communication (Rogers, 1986; Jensen, 2010; Jackson, Nielsen, & Hsu, 2011). In other words, technology plays a key role in the determination of the communication channel's characteristics. Whereas studies have already noticed the emergence of new-media-diffused rumor, its features remain largely unexplored and underappreciated. On the one hand, most studies remain focused on rumors that are spread by word of mouth. On the other hand, current scholars of rumor and new media mostly emphasize the social-psychological framework of rumor to theorize the diffusion of rumor through new media, including the internet and mobile phones (Bordia & Rosnow, 1998; Fisher, 1998; Bordia & DiFonzo, 2004; Ma, 2008; Sunstein, 2009). Yet evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that the widespread adoption of ICTs gives rumor—originally spread by word of mouth—digital wings, accelerating and widening rumor circulation with an unprecedented impact on societies. Against the backdrop of technological progress, either diffusion of new media rumor or leveraging new media channels to deny rumor is not just “as political as it is sociological” (Kapferer, 1990: 14), but it is also a technologically shaped event. Hence, ongoing interdisciplinary work is needed to understand the dynamics of

new-media-mediated rumor in a highly complex culture of technological convergence.

Equally important, cultural factors have long been known to influence the communicative network in which rumor diffusion occurs. However, existing research on rumor fails to pay enough attention to the impact of the culturally shaped communicative network on rumor diffusion. Presenting cultural histories of rumor, for instance, Neubauer criticized that the psychological study of rumor—to be specific, that from Allport and Postman (1947)—“...completely ignores the significance of the communicative network” (Neubauer, 1999: 167). In the context of China, accordingly, we need to investigate how *guanxi*¹ (Yan, 1996; Bian & Ang, 1997; Kipnis, 1997; Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002), the particular communicative ties in Chinese society, is related to rumor in the context of new media platforms.

More specifically, in his study of new media rumors, Ma called for further rumor studies in light of the unique social and cultural environments in China (Ma, 2008: 388). Equally important, how people perceive rumors through their culture-shaped mobile communicative network will affect how they treat messages, including rumors (e.g., cultural shifts in ideas about truth and falsity). Ma specifically proposes that the unique reciprocity dynamic within *guanxi*, which means information sharing within one’s network, makes rumor very easy to proliferate in Chinese society (Ma, 2008). However, does it mean that the reciprocal dynamic, or *guanxi* in general, overcomes fear of censorship or punishment? As we have already seen, the censor’s reach in contemporary China extends to each personal mobile phone and personal digital assistant with the pertinacious goal of eliminating rumors (Wu, 2011; Chai, 2011; for more on the call for control over *Weibo*, the Chinese microblog, see Chen [2011]). As

¹ See more discussion on *guanxi*-embedded mobile social networks in China in *Chapter Five*.

early as 2003, harsher sentences for mobile phone rumor were carried out quickly during the SARS epidemic (*Beijing Daily Messenger*, 2003). It is currently commonplace for mobile phone and internet users to be fined, arrested, prosecuted, or held in custody for “initiating” or “disseminating” rumors (Li, 2007; Yu, 2010). Therefore, does *guanxi* have the power to involve people spontaneously into spreading rumor, regardless of the authorities’ censorship and punishment? This question is exactly what Kapferer stresses, “...what must be explained in the genesis of a rumor penetration is the group’s adherence and mobilization” (Kapferer, 1990: 20).

6.2.3 Method

This chapter proposes to extend our understanding of the role of mobile phones in Chinese people’s everyday lives by analyzing six examples of mobile phone rumors in China. The overall strategy in this chapter is a multiple-case study approach with a focus on the theoretical and political implications of mobile phone rumors. As the discussion in the methodology chapter illustrates¹, I pick up prototypical mobile phone rumor cases in China, in which the experiences have either been replicated or reappeared in other events. With the help from research assistants, then, I located and recruited interviewees who have received and forwarded rumors via their mobile phones in these events through RDS and carried out interviews.

Concerning the choice of methods, moreover, critics argue that studies of rumor under laboratory conditions are far from real circumstances, and provide a less accurate description of the process by which rumors are spread. For instance, Peterson and Gist point out:

¹ See the case selection criteria and detailed interview questions in *Chapter Four*.

[I]t is very unlikely that the methodological problems [of rumor study] can be solved by applying the orthodox procedures of simplification and control employed in experimental psychology. Methodological contingencies lift the object of investigation out of its context so completely that the findings no longer pertain to rumor but to simple perception, memory and recall.

(Peterson & Gist, 1951: 161)

Accordingly, Shibutani advocates the “situational approach” in his sociological studies of rumor:

If rumors are viewed as the cooperative improvisation of interpretations, it becomes apparent that they cannot be studied fruitfully apart from the social contexts in which they arise. They are not isolated reports but phases of a more inclusive adjustive process, and the analysis of symbolic content alone is not likely to yield adequate understanding. An appreciation of any rumor requires some knowledge of the sensitivities shared by the people and the manner in which they are mobilizing to act.

(Shibutani, 1966: 23)

Therefore, we adopt the “situational approach” to examine rumor spreading in contemporary China. This approach makes my study different from most of the existing ones, which are based on either archives (Huang, 2005; Li, 2005; Smith, 2006, 2008; Li, 2011) or news reports (Hu, 2009; Zhou, 2010). To be more specific, the research is based on telephone interviews and fieldwork conducted inside China

between 2007 and 2011, including observations and face-to-face in-depth interviews with participants who have been involved in spreading rumor. The researcher employed five assistants to record the spontaneous emergence and flow of rumors in a limited group setting for the sake of a more accurate portrayal of the process of rumor spreading and specifying its evolution in a natural situation. The interview included three sets of questions as follows: one on *the basic information* in mobile phone rumor, such as its content, when it is received, and the number of messages received; a second set of questions on the interpretation of rumor *via a mobile phone*, including how people understand the rumor from their mobile device, whether they believe it or not and why; a third set of questions registered how people *deal with* mobile phone rumor including further dissemination of the rumor, to whom, via which channels, and why¹.

Two points related to case selection should be clarified in advance.

First, the messages that this study selects as “rumors” are based on government statements and news reports. However, that does not mean that we share the government’s or mass media’s position of viewing these messages as “fabrications deliberately spread with a malicious intent.” To be clear, this study aims to explicate how and why these officially labeled “rumors” flourish through mobile phones. It is therefore not our intent to explore the origin of rumors, verify their accuracy, or identify the so-called “ill-intentioned mastermind” behind a thriving rumor. It is notable that, as a later discussion will demonstrate, many of our interviewees in practice *do not* care much whether the content (message itself) is true.

Second, unlike previous studies that have mostly revolved around the content, this study emphasizes how the communicative channel (mobile phone) functions when

¹ See detailed information about interview questions in *Chapter Fourth*.

people trade rumors. In other words, it addresses the technologically mediated channel of rumor spread rather than its content. If rumor is “an interpretive transaction made up of communicative acts” (Shibutani, 1966:131), then, without doubt, the communicative channel plays a crucial role in dissemination. With a careful examination of the technical, social, and cultural factors, consequently, we are able to provide a richer and more comprehensive illustration and understanding of not just the role of mobile phone rumor but also the use of mobile phones in rumor diffusion.

6.3 MOBILE PHONE RUMORS IN COMTEMPORARY CHINA

I address the following six sample cases chronologically: the anti-PX demonstration in southeast China’s Xiamen, Fujian Province from May to June 2007; the mass incident in west China’s Weng’an, Guizhou Province in June 2008; the earthquake panic in central China’s Shanxi Province in January 2010; the chemical factory’s pollution scare in east China’s Xiangshui, Jiangsu Province in February 2011; the mass incident in southern China’s Zhengcheng city, Guangdong Province in June 2011; and the anti-PX demonstration in northeast China’s Dalian, Shandong Province in August 2011. According to the different consequences of our cases, I categorize them into three types as follows: (a) rumor and panic; (b) rumor and demonstration; and (c) rumor and mass incident.

6.3.1 Mobile phone rumor and panic

Of natural disaster rumors, earthquake rumors easily trigger the greatest panic in China. This was particularly the case after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, a 7.9-magnitude earthquake rocking a mountainous region in Western China, killing about

70,000 people and leaving over 18,000 missing (*The New York Times*, 2009). News reports showed that earthquake rumors via mobile phones and the internet ran rife over ten provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, including Shanxi (January to February), Jiangsu, Shaanxi, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, and Beijing (April), Shandong (May), and Hubei (May to June) in the first half of 2010 alone. Among these rumors, the one originating in the Shanxi Province at the beginning of 2010 not only launched widespread panic, but also prompted thousands of people in dozens of cities and counties to leave their houses and to evacuate into the streets after midnight (*China Daily*, 2010; Li & Zhao, 2010; Lv & Wang, 2010; Wang & Sun, 2010).

The text message¹ about an impending earthquake had swirled among and haunted residents as early as January 6, 2010 after earthquake emergency drills were conducted in several local hospitals (Phoenix Satellite Television, 2010). If an earthquake had not been predicted, why would the government organize such a drill? (Wang & Sun, 2010) However, the local government offered no explanation and “turned a blind eye”² to people’s misgivings and anxiety. The official reticence deepened the unease in several cities. Around 1 a.m. on February 21, the rumor of an imminent destructive quake circulated by mobile phone calls and text messages, becoming the last straw that broke the camel’s back. “Half of the entire province has been awash in rumor within two hours,” according to the *Orient Morning Post* (*dongfang zaobao*) (Yu, 2010). Residents in several cities fled to the streets and parks for security, calling or texting their family members and friends about this “confirmed” information: that there would be a 6.0 magnitude earthquake between 1

¹ Telephone interviews with residents in Taiyuan, Yuci, and Yuncheng, March 2010. According to the *Shanxi Youth Daily* (*shangxi qingnian bao*), the content of the text message was: “Recently hospitals have been busy with earthquake drills and storing supplies of medicines. This shows that a strong earthquake seems likely to happen. Please prepare for the coming quake and avoid staying in buildings” (Wang & Sun, 2010).

² Telephone interviews with residents in Taiyuan, Yuci, and Yuncheng, March 2010.

and 7 a.m.¹. Even though the local government denied earthquake rumors via mass media, sent over 20 million SMS messages that required people not to forward earthquake rumors, and encouraged them to return to their houses, people kept sending warnings via their mobile phones and “waited for an earthquake” until dawn (Xinhua, 2011). The local public security department arrested five “rumormongers” within four days.

Natural disaster rumors are not the only ones that set off large-scale panic and cause the masses to flee for their lives. Around 2 a.m. on February 10, 2011, more than 10,000 residents in four townships swarmed onto the streets after a message went viral (mainly through mobile phones), asserting that a chemical factory would explode in the coastal county of Xiangshui in east China’s Jiangsu Province.

According to Xinhua’s report, the mass exodus killed four people and injured many (Xinhua, 2011). Local government soon declared that the “chemical factory explosion” was a rumor generated by a villager who believed that the chemical factories nearby were leaking gas and would explode before long, after he found “white smoke” from one plant and experienced a more pungent odor than usual (Xinhua, 2011). Public security agents detained the villager, and the government announced that this matter was a wholly rumor-induced panic. The government announcement failed to calm public fears, however. People still shared doubt and trepidation about the factories after official rumor rejection².

6.3.2 Mobile phone rumor and demonstrations

Mobile phone rumors result in not only panic and exoduses, but also in demonstrations and protest events. The demonstration and popular protest against the

¹ See, for instance, Wang & Sun (2010). Related photos and discussions, see Tiarui (2010).

² Interviews with residents in Xiangshui, February 2011.

paraxylene project—known as the PX project—in Xiamen in 2007 and Dalian in 2011 are cases in point. More specifically, we elaborate on the mobile-phone–driven anti-PX movement in Xiamen because it greatly influenced the protest activities afterward, especially that in Dalian (Kurtenbach, 2008; Huang, 2008; BBC, 2011).

Rumor circulation fulfilled a vital role in triggering protests against the PX project in Xiamen. Fearing petrochemical contamination, Zhao Yufen, a professor of chemistry and chemical engineering from Xiamen University, raised the opposition to the construction of the PX project during the “Two Congresses” in March 2007. However, both local government and media had largely been quiet about Zhao’s argument until a text message warned that:

[W]hen this massive toxic chemical product [PX project] goes into production, that will mean an atomic bomb has been set off in all of Xiamen island. The people of Xiamen will live with leukemia and deformed babies.¹

Environmental protection concern initiated resident worries. Despite the government being barraged by inquiries from local people, there was yet no official response or explanation. Instead, the commentators on the website of the local party organ, the *Xiamen Daily* (*xiamen ribao*), rebuked Zhao for not having “true expertise” and knowing little about environmental protection. Additionally, “she [Zhao] was manufacturing *rumors* to mislead the public” and “...was deliberately trying to ruin the image of Xiamen.”² [emphasis added] News report also consulted an anonymous chemistry expert from the Chinese Academy of Sciences who rejected “the *rumor* that

¹ The content of a text message.

² Interviews with residents in Xiamen, September, 2010. Also see *The Sun* (2007).

PX can easily lead to deformed babies” as “exaggerated” [emphasis added] (Zhu, 2007).

However, the denials failed to stop the transmission and persistence of the rumor. On the contrary, millions of local residents joined the campaign against the PX project by circulating the “rumor” via their mobile phones. By the end of May, residents started to organize a demonstration against the PX project in order to show their discontent and draw more attention from authorities to this issue. Mobilization SMS that called on people to “take action!,” “tie with yellow ribbons,” “participate among 10,000 people,” and “pass this message on to all your Xiamen friends!” proliferated within hours. Meanwhile, interviews revealed that local government tried to persuade residents that the mobilization messages had been sent from people with “ulterior motives [for retarding local development].” As local government urged, residents should “not trust or spread malicious *rumors*” [emphasis added] and “never be used by other people who have ulterior motives”¹ (Xia, 2007). Even after authorities and the police launched a crack-down on rumormongers, however, the rumor still continued its course and led to a demonstration by at least 20,000 people beyond anything the government could have anticipated on June 1.

A similar situation happened with the mass protests against the PX plant in the northeastern city of Dalian on August 14, 2011. Organized through mobile phones, *Weibo* and social networks, more than 10,000 residents—mostly middle-to-upper class—marched through the streets to demand the relocation of the chemical plant at the center of a toxic spill scare. Indeed, this occurred in spite of ramped-up

¹ Also see Han & Lu (2007), Xiamen TV’s news program from June 1 to 2, 2007. On the evening of June 1, the Xiamen People’s Congress, the People’s Political Consultative Conference, the Communist Youth League, and the Women’s Federation convened. The speeches at those meetings were also aired on TV in turn. The general opinion was: all residents should be more appreciative of the city’s favorable situation of stability and solidarity, and offer suggestions and opinions through proper processes. “Don’t be gullible” and “never be used by other people.”

government crackdowns and a state media campaign against “rumors” of pollution from the PX project (Yu, 2011; YouTube, 2011).

6.3.3 Mobile phone rumor and mass incidents

More commonly, rumor has resulted in what government calls “mass incidents,” the propaganda department’s euphemism for civil unrest and, particularly, violent conflicts—usually fatal—when the rumor contains one or several of the following elements: death [by unnatural causes], rape, assault, corruption, abuse of power, and forced demolitions (Deng, 2008; Hu, 2009). The most notable example is the mass incident in Weng’an County, in southwestern Guizhou Province in 2008 (Buxi, 2008; Ding, 2008; Zhang, Zhu, & Huang, 2008). A 16 year-old local girl was found dead in a river. After the official autopsies, local authorities concluded that her death was suicide by drowning. The internet and mobile phone networks, however, had been awash with rumors that this was no suicide: that the girl had been raped and murdered by a relative of a senior county official or police officer. Local government rejected the rumor and further hired commentators to guide public opinions, but to little effect (Ma, 2008). After the girl’s family went to petition at the country party committee office, a rumor spread swiftly through the mobile phone and the internet, asserting that the relatives and some of the victim’s classmates went to the police headquarters to question the government’s conclusion, only to receive a beating that later resulted in their deaths (Zhao, Zhou, & Liu, 2008; Shu, 2009). With mobilization resulting from the rumor, according to Xinhua, up to 30,000 people assaulted and torched the local police station and smashed the county government office buildings (Yu, 2008; Xinhua, 2008).

The picture was similar to the mass incident in Zhengcheng in southern Guangdong Province, June 2011. When *chengguan*, or “urban administration” inspectors (a secondary security force employed to take pressure off the police by enforcing regulations), tried to move a vendor and his pregnant wife’s market stall away from a supermarket entrance, the woman had been shoved to the ground after she refused to move her market stall (Han, 2011). *Chengguan*’s action led to a clash on the set between crowds of onlookers and *chengguan* together with police officers who arrived later. Mobile phone and internet rumor then floated around the city, mutating into the story that police had injured the expectant mother and killed her husband. Hundreds of migrant workers rioted next day, setting fire to cars and damaging local government buildings. According to *the China Daily*, Mayor of Zhengcheng urged local residents “not to spread concocted *rumors*” while local government was racing to “clarify the *rumor* about a clash between security personnel and a pregnant street vendor” [emphasis added] by sending working groups to factories and households (Zheng, 2011). However, authorities’ repeated refusal did little to silence the rumor mill¹.

6.4 HOW MOBILE TECHNOLOGY INFLUENCES AND EMPOWERS RUMOR

The cases of rumor communication via mobile phones not only demonstrate the devastating influence of rumor on Chinese society, but also shed some new light on the changing characteristics of rumor under the impact of mobile technology. In particular, the socio-technological features of mobile media in China complicate the

¹ Online interview with a 32-year-old journalist in Shantou, July 2011.

government’s efforts to control and eliminate rumors, further compounding the impact of rumor on social and political lives in China. Next, in the matrix (Figure 6.1) given below, I generalize and lay out four unique characteristics of mobile phone rumors in the context of China. Based on the matrix, I also elaborate on how mobile technology changes and further empowers rumor in China. The matrix distinguishes, on the one hand, between technological and socio-cultural features and, on the other hand, between macro- and micro-level features of mobile phone rumors. It is necessary to mention that mobile phone rumor has a technological dimension and a social-political dimension that often overlap in practice even though they are analytically distinct from each other.

	Macro Level	Micro Level
Technology	Rapid Diffusion	<i>Censor-Evading Rhetoric</i>
Socio-culture	Deep Embedding	“Mutual Visibility”

Figure 6.1 How mobile technology changes and empowers rumor in China.

6.4.1 Rapid diffusion

In the upper left corner of the figure, the term “*rapid diffusion*” addresses a technological feature of mobile phone rumor on the macro level. The accessibility of mobile technology—including perpetual contact, synchronous communication, and low-priced group texting—brings instant communication and allows the diffusion of rumor to occur rapidly (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling, 2004; Ling & Campbell, 2009; Jensen, 2010: 71-72). As a uniquely easy-to-use and instant communication device, more specifically, the mobile phone allows users to get in touch with each other, but also to receive and relay rumors, at the flick of a button. Additionally, low-cost mass

texting services offer a cheap way to distribute messages (including rumors) on a large scale, which accordingly brings rumors into the open within a short time.

As an example, let us take a look at the spreading of a mobile phone rumor in Xiangshui. The rumor that a chemical explosion was going to happen soon was getting around in the middle of the night in a village where “most residents were sleeping” (Lin, 2011). Meanwhile, a huge blizzard was producing large amounts of snow. This kind of circumstance is hardly conducive to the spread of information, no matter news or rumor, through any traditional medium or the internet. However, it was through mobile phones that the rumor went rampant within two hours and then drove over 10,000 residents from four townships to swarm onto the streets. Reportedly, people received mobile calls at midnight from relatives, friends, and colleagues, which urged them “to run quickly for your life! The chemical factory nearby is going to explode!” The calls also urged “to warn the people around [you] as soon as possible.”¹ Residents fled with others and, just as importantly, “called their family members” and “sent group messages.”² Local mobile networks crashed due to server overload; thousands of people were sending and receiving calls and text messages to warn their family members and friends (Lin, 2011).

The introduction of instant communication and rapid diffusion give mobile phone rumors an unpredictable nature. It is nearly impossible to predict when, where, and to what extent a mobile phone rumor is going to erupt. For instance, during the SARS epidemic in 2003, the text message rumor of “fatal viruses appear in Guangzhou” was forwarded 40 million times in Guangzhou during a single day, with an additional 41 million on the second day and 45 million on the third day (Chen & Jiang, 2003). Even with the ability to detect and refute rumors, governmental authority still lacks the

¹ Interview with a 48-year-old doctor, Jiangsu, February 2011.

² Interview with a 22-year-old university student from Jiangsu Province, Fuzhou, February 2011.

strength and resources to exercise control over both the emergence and persistence of rumors. In the case of Zhengcheng, even though security personnel were patrolling the streets and had ordered local residents to stay in their homes overnight, a rumor still broke out “like a storm”¹ at 3 a.m. about the poor couple who were victims of *chengguan* brutality. Likewise, in the anti-PX events, local government agents “never anticipated that mobile users involved in spreading rumors [would] surge past [a] million people within three days,”² when they had already taken measures to prevent rumor from spreading in the city. In short, because of the rapid diffusion of mobile phone rumors, both preventing the outbreak and stemming the flow of rumor are incredibly difficult for governments to attain, which accordingly increases the possibility of out-of-control rumor spreading.

6.4.2 The deep embedding of mobile communication in propaganda systems

The technological features of mobile communication are just part of the reason why it is hard to stop rumor proliferation. The *deep embedding*—in the lower left corner of the figure—of mobile communication in both social and propaganda systems makes it increasingly difficult for the party to keep a grip on mobile communication, whether through old-fashioned control or subtler advancing of agendas.

More specifically, as mobile phones seamlessly insinuate themselves into people’s everyday lives, mobile communication has become embedded in all of the activities that make up daily life. Accordingly, the traditional or conventional communication-control methods sometimes become ineffective or may even backfire in the face of mobile communication.

¹ Interview with a 32-year-old journalist, Guangzhou, June 2011.

² Interview with a 28-year-old graduate student, Fuzhou, September 2010.

We have seen a large number of measures taken against the spread of rumors by the various Chinese authorities. Undoubtedly, government can, by use of its monopoly powers, markedly reduce the speed at which a rumor spreads even in this era of the internet. Specifically, they retain much control over digital media; the party's propaganda machine is able to block websites, shut down online forums, and even cut off internet service¹ in order to stop online rumor from spreading. However, Chinese governmental authority finds it difficult to take the same approach (just shutting down service) with mobile telephones, even though the party has already realized that cutting off service is the most effective means for controlling mobile phone rumors (Reuters, 2012; Branigan, 2012). The difficulty of enforcement is accentuated by the fact that, on the one hand, "officials, themselves, have as much motive to contact each other through mobile service as have ordinary citizens."² In the case of Xiamen, for instance, local government was forced to restore the telecommunication network after a two-hour, rumor-suppression shutdown. Because, according to a civil servant working for government, "lots of government agencies complained that they could not work without telecommunication services."³ On the other hand, shutting down mobile phone service—even temporarily—easily triggers greater public anger and drives citizens to join the protests against government because this move obviously interrupted more people's—even those who weren't involved in spreading the rumors—normal life and work. Therefore, it is never as easy to cut off mobile phone service as it is to cut off internet service.

More importantly, as part of the e-governance initiative that addresses the incorporation of ICTs into the party's propaganda mechanism (Brady, 2006: 67-68),

¹ For instance, the shutdown of internet service after the 2009 Xinjiang riots, see Anonymous (2010). For the tight control of internet and mobile phone service ahead of the annual Chinese parliamentary session, see Reuters (2012).

² Interview with a 29-year-old civil servant at Propaganda Department, Fujian, April 2010.

³ Interview with a 28-year-old civil servant in Xiamen, December 2010.

the government relies on the telecommunication network to “spread propaganda messages debunking rumor.”¹ This makes it increasingly difficult for the government to cut off mobile phone access arbitrarily. For example, in the case of the earthquake rumor in Shanxi, local government sent out over 20 million SMS messages to deny earthquake rumors, encouraging residents to return to their houses (Xinhua, 2011). If the government disables the mobile telecommunication network, it also loses the mobile phone platform as a means of promulgating propaganda. Therefore, cutting off mobile phone service is a means that not only pays a political price (impeding government’s propaganda campaigns against rumor), but also easily gets authorities into larger trouble (interfering with people’s daily activities at work and so on). Against this backdrop, mobile communication has become an effective way, at least for local residents, to circumvent local government’s politically motivated crackdown on telecommunication, particularly shutdowns of internet service.

6.4.3 Mutual visibility

On the micro level, the changes and their related impacts that are brought by mobile technology are more subtle, but nonetheless more relevant to the spread of rumor. As we can see in the lower right corner of the figure, another key characteristic of mobile phone rumor is *mutual visibility*. This means that the communicators—both sender and receiver—know that the other has already involved himself/herself in the process of communication and, more importantly, in the unfolding of events.

Mutual visibility introduces *guanxi* into the communication process of mobile phone use. The *guanxi*-embedded mobile communication in turn, as we have already

¹ Interview with a 29-year-old civil servant at Propaganda Department, Fujian, April 2010. Also see Lai (2010).

observed¹, increases both the likelihood of sharing messages and the perceived credibility of the information, even for rumor. For instance, in the case of the anti-PX demonstration in Xiamen, our interviewees consented that they would trust information from their mobile social network, even if “the senders do not have enough knowledge about the topic (i.e., the impact of PX plants on the local environment).”² As one interviewee emphasized, “it is a matter of mutual trust, not verification.”³ Also, a large majority of our interviewees agreed that they would pass the message on to people in their mobile social network. As several interviewees explain, “if the message is important to me, it becomes important to my friends.”⁴

More importantly, mutual visibility creates a foundation of consensus, which increases the likelihood of engagement. To be specific, mutual visibility not only includes identity verification (Who sent me this message? Whom shall I send messages to? Why?), but also increases an individual’s awareness, understanding, and sense of safety and security in engagement by creating the perception of *concrete* support from a mobile social network (e.g., Who is helping/will help me spread the message?) (Ling, 2004, 2008). According to Kapferer’s (1990) argument, “to talk about rumors is to take part in the group.” Likewise, to spread rumor is to take part in the group as well. During this process, the mutual visibility of mobile communication creates a shared awareness of shared actions. As Shirky (2011) paraphrases related to the military, shared awareness refers to “the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too.” In the case of a rumor spreading through mobile phone communication, accordingly, it is not just that “I hear a rumor” or that “I know that other people hear the rumor as

¹ See more detailed discussion in *Chapter Five* on *guanxi* and mobile social networks.

² Interviews with residents, Xiamen, May and June, 2007, and September, 2010.

³ Interview with a 30-year-old editor, Beijing, March 2011.

⁴ Online interviews with residents in Taiyuan, February 2010.

well,” but that “I know that the people I know [such as intimates, colleagues, and so on] will forward the rumor.” Put differently, mobile communication facilitates the understanding that our situational awareness is shared by the people we know, who are also aware they are not alone in their situational awareness. This kind of shared awareness shapes people’s thoughts and feelings, greatly encouraging them to join the “mutual recognized engagement” (Ling, 2008: xi) by talking about and spreading the rumor via their mobile phones. Additionally, this kind of shared awareness generated by mobile communication also puts people in a specific kind of situation that makes them feel obligated to participate in rumor diffusion, as they perceive that their participations would play a relevant role in fulfilling mutual obligation, responsibilities, and duties in *guanxi* practices. As our interviews show, the most common answer to the question “Do you ever get scared that you will be punished for spreading rumors?” is “so many people I know—my friends, intimates, colleagues—have already joined in [spreading rumors as well as this particular event]. How can I shut myself out?”¹ Here, the strong sense of obligation via mobile communication is hardly seen from other *invisible* communication channels, in particular the internet. In other words, mobile communication generates peer support among individuals and greatly encourages them to participate in rumor dissemination, even in the face of government’s intimidation of rumor surveillance and punishments. In sum, spontaneous engagement in rumor spreading happens in a concrete, collaborative relationship with a high degree of trust, reliability, and shared awareness between both parties.

In fact, without sufficient visibility, shared awareness or security will be eroded, making it difficult for people to involve themselves in rumor spreading. A good

¹ Telephone interviews with residents in Taiyuan, Yuncheng, and Yuci, Shanxi Province, March 2010.

example is the different ways people look at mobile phone rumors compared to online ones. To a certain degree, as Fisher observed, the internet indeed “has made possible rumoring between people who have never met or communicated before” (Fisher, 1998: 159). However, the anonymous nature of the internet keeps people from “seeing” each other. When visibility (which includes audibility as well) or mutually recognized engagement is not sufficient, people will be unaware of much critical information. Accordingly, invisibility on the internet makes people regard online rumor as “information/reference” at best. Instead, mutual visibility during mobile communication dissolves the barriers of invisibility and motivates members from mobile social networks to get involved in a common event. According to our interviewees, mobile phone rumor is far ahead of online rumor when it comes to willingness and crowd scale of engagement in spreading the rumor. According to our interviewees, mobile phone rumor has much higher engagement rates compared to those of online rumor (almost 9 times in fact), even when both of them include the same message¹. In other words, the degree to which rumors motivate civic engagement increases faster through mobile phone networks that have many concrete ties instead of through online networks with many anonymous connections. Mutual visibility is therefore key because people are more likely to engage in a behavior or an event if they see many others they know doing it.

6.4.4 Censor-evading rhetoric

Last but not least, people are turning to the power of rhetoric to help them break through government keyword blocking and censorship filters in order to deliver rumors and other vital information through mobile phone services and the internet.

¹ During interviews, 51 of 56 interviewees said that they would forward earthquake rumors received on their mobile phones whereas only 5 of 56 would for an online rumor.

That is what I have placed “*sensor-evading rhetoric*” in the upper right corner of the figure.

The term “rhetoric” here largely refers to “...innuendo and metaphor, parody and hyperbole,” “sarcasm and scorn through veiled gibes and wily indirection” (Yu, 2011). For instance, where references to Xiamen or Dalian—the names of the two cities where anti-PX demonstrations broke out—are banned, mobile and internet users make up their own acronyms (e.g., XM for Xiamen and DL for Dalian) to evade the censors. “*sanbu*” (stroll) and “*gouwu*” (shopping) have emerged as alternatives to both “demonstration” and “protest.” “*Hecha*” (drinking tea) became the metaphorical call for strikes by taxi drivers¹, and “May 35” is now a euphemistic term for Chinese people to describe, by implication, “June 4,” the date of the Tiananmen incident of 1989 (Yu, 2011). Even if they are aware of these censor-evading or hidden meanings sent through the internet and mobile phones, officials can hardly ban them because, as He points out, “it is impossible to ban the arbitrary combinations of characters, which can be done or changed in a flash of time, unless all characters are banned” (He, 2008: 188).

In practice, it is easy to circumvent government-imposed censorship. Use of “embedded spaces or signs, such as %, \$, or #, between words”² is one of the most common, simple, and effective approaches to bypass traps the government has in place to screen out sensitive content. One mobile technician explains: “in this way, the key word has also been changed. Obviously, it is impossible for us [service providers] to track and delete every message including, for instance, P and X.” To find a way around government-imposed censorship when expressing their opinions, as Yu summarizes, “Chinese people give full rein to the rhetorical functions of language,

¹ Interviews with taxi drivers in Fuzhou and Guangzhou, October to December 2010. Also see Shan (2008).

² Interview with a 35-year-old software engineer, Fuzhou, December 2010. Also see NHK (2011).

elevating to a sublime level both innuendo and metaphor, parody and hyperbole, conveying sarcasm and scorn through veiled gibes and wily indirection” (Yu, 2011).

Moreover, as censorship increases, the interest in pushing back against government-backed censorship grows even higher. The Chinese have become adept at getting past censorship by various means. As one webmaster in charge of the censorship and surveillance of an online forum claims, “people would keep on working out new ways to circumvent censorship and interact with each other [through mobile phone and the internet.]”¹

In short, on the macro level, mobile technology’s embedding in social systems—and the propaganda system in particular—makes it hard for the government to shut down telecommunication service to prevent the spread of a rumor. Also, unpredictable, rapid, spontaneous diffusion of a rumor via mobile communication often leaves a government unprepared. On the micro level, *guanxi*-based mutual visibility during mobile communication nurtures shared awareness and further encourages both sides to act towards a mutually recognized engagement in circulation of the rumor. At the same time, new anti-censorship schemes are emerging at a dramatic rate, offering Chinese mobile phone users a way to disseminate a rumor despite censorship. Overall, the mobile technology offers rumor new characteristics, makes it increasingly difficult for the party to control or eliminate rumors, and, consequently, adds additional capabilities to mobile phone rumor, which becomes a new form of *online* public resistance in contemporary China.

6.5 RUMOR COMMUNICATION, PUBLIC DISTRUST, AND “RESISTANCE IDENTITY”

¹ Online interview with a 32-year-old webmaster in Shenzhen, December 2010.

Given the characteristics of mobile phone rumors, Chinese people increasingly employ them as a new means of (a) expressing distrust toward the government, (b) articulating their “resistant identity” (Castells, 2010: 8), and (c) striking against censorship and communication control.

6.5.1 Rumor communication and public distrust toward authorities

First and foremost, feelings of suspicion and distrust toward authorities form the necessary basis of rumor proliferation. As several studies have pointed out, rumor seems to thrive where there is a dearth of trust towards formal sources of information (Shibutani, 1966; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007a: 201). In other words, people compensate with informal speculation, or even rumor, when they distrust formal news sources.

The situation is even worse in China. Government’s censorship generates a highly non-transparent circumstance, erodes the government and its media’s credibility, and undermines public confidence, leaving people highly suspicious and distrustful toward authorities. Against this backdrop, there is an ingrained belief among Chinese people that “government would never have censored information had they not had anything to hide or refuse in the first place” (Bai, 2010: 93). Moreover, some people think that censorship sometimes even comes with an aim of “maintaining stability” while sacrificing people’s lives. For instance, some people believed that in order to prevent the earthquake panic, government even suppressed earthquake predictions before the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, presumably resulting in 70,000 people losing their lives and over 374,000 people being injured (Zhang, 2008). This kind of pervasive distrust becomes the soil that easily nurtures rumor and encourages the spread of rumors.

The situation is exacerbated when Chinese authorities resort to the blame game whenever anxiety or conflict arises. To be clear, government's rumor denial deteriorates government's relationship with the populace, leaving people to vent their discontent and anger towards government's inaction by forwarding rumors. As one interviewee complained about the earthquake rumor case:

[T]he only thing government is good at is to define "rumor" and to eliminate what it calls "rumors." Accordingly, labeling a message a rumor becomes the simplest tactic for them [the government] to clean up their responsibilities or inaction. They [the government] never consider a case's specific situation. Because no matter what the situation is, it is presented as though it is the rumor's fault. Nor do they [the government] take people's feelings and voices into account.¹

From the above statement, we can clearly see people's rancor and distrust toward a government that repeatedly conceals facts from its people, or shifts responsibility from itself to so-called "rumor." In this way, people would "simply believe in the rumor, rather than the government's words" (Yiyin, 2011). Consequently, circulating rumor—even after the official rumor denial comes out—becomes a common practice for people to express their general distrust of government. In sum, this significant distrust not only constitutes a fertile constituency for rumor, but also has been expressed through the collective actions of disseminating rumor via mobile phones.

¹ Telephone interview with a 35-year-old lawyer in Taiyuan, March 2011.

6.5.2 Counter-authority initiatives and “resistance identity” in rumor communication

Rumor communication not only reveals a pervasive distrust among people, but, most importantly, it also demonstrates an aggressive *activism* against official refutation and demonization of rumor, a counter-authority initiative or, as Kapferer (1990: 14) describes, “a counter-power” behind the proliferation of mobile phone rumor.

To be more specific, interestingly, the large majority of interviewees had experienced the phenomenon of rumor spreading even *after* government and mass media deny it; but, on top of that, about half of the interviewees agreed that they “would continue to pass on those messages after governments toss out the accusation as a ‘rumor’.”¹ In other words, the [vigorous] accusations and denials from authorities to blast rumor are in fact counter-productive, undermining their attempts to stop rumor, instead inflaming and multiplying it. The dynamic driving the phenomenon of rumor flooding is the construction and expression of “resistance identity” by and of mobile phone users.

In his elaboration of the concept of identity in networked society, Castells (2010: 8-9) divides the forms and origins of identity into three types: legitimizing identity, resistance identity, and project identity. “Resistance identity,” according to Castells, is:

...generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society.

¹ Interviews with residents in Xiamen and Beijing, October 2010.

(Castells, 2010: 8)

Whereas Castells uses this concept to describe, in principle, “forms of collective resistance against otherwise *unbearable oppression*” [emphasis added], he limits his examples to those “usually” excluded or oppressed identities that are defined by “history, geography, or biology” (Castells, 2010: 9). This approach, as I see it, fails to take into account the reality of the complex, ever-changing strategy of exclusion and oppression in different contexts. Instead, in the case of rumor in China, the repeated allegation of reactionary (“ulterior motives”) and irrational (“ignorant of the truth”) motivations in official rhetoric grows into a specific kind of “unbearable oppression,” which, in turn, galvanizes citizens into forwarding rumor via their mobile devices as a resistant action against government’s denials. To be more precise, this is resistance against government’s very label of “the many [as] being ignorant of the truth,” which has served as a prime motivator for spreading rumor via mobile communication in general. As one interviewee argues:

[P]eople are “irrational” and “ignorant of the truth” only because they feel worried about their living environment and try to figure out the truth. On the contrary, people are “rational” when they obey the rules and do not question government. What kind of logic is that? We definitely know the truth! We are not “the many being ignorant of the truth”!¹

The charges of “rumormonger” and “the many being ignorant of the truth” therefore have been widely regarded as inferior excuses for the government “not to take

¹ Interviews with a 35-year-old resident in Xiamen, September 2010, also see “Chinese people are always ‘being ignorant of the truth,’ not because we are stupid but because the truth is quite unclear,” <http://club.cul.sohu.com/r-history-771501-0-2-900.html>, accessed August 12, 2012.

responsibility for related public panic,” “to ban people’s discussion on hidden danger,” or “to forbid people’s opposition [against the government’s decision].”¹ People spontaneously and actively join the camp in slamming arbitrary government action by disseminating mobile phone rumors, articulating their “resistance identities,” and expressing their discontent and anger towards the dominant discourse. In other words, rumor denial from the authorities contributes to a *shift of focus* from rumor itself to government, which unearths larger-scale discontent and anger among people and accordingly results in increasing numbers of people involving themselves in spreading the officially labeled rumor.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the resistance identity accompanied by rumor communication is a *temporary* identity in a specific context. To be more specific, the expression of resistant identity through the action of disseminating rumors via mobile phones is more or less a kind of reactive activity. Put otherwise, people build up this *reactive* type of resistance identity² that points strongly towards government’s allegations rather than the dominant ideology. Although it is to a large extent against the logic of domination, this kind of resistance identity disappears or collapses soon after the affiliated event has ended. Moreover, because of its transient nature, resistance identity accompanied by rumor communication would hardly transform into, as Castells (2010: 8) proposes, a legitimizing identity. As a result, the proliferation of mobile phone rumors is more or less an event-driven (instead of an ideology-driven) agenda, which accordingly restricts its long-run impact on Chinese society.

6.5.3 Rumor as resistance against censorship and communication control

¹ Telephone interviews with residents in Taiyuan, Yuci, Yuncheng, Shanxi Province, March 2011.

² See the discussion on “reactive public” in contemporary China in *Chapter Two*.

Although people articulate their resistance identities by the same action—distributing rumor via their mobile devices, they appear to have two different intentions behind resisting authorities’ arbitrary claims. Some interviewees regard the message that the government deems a “rumor” to be exactly the information that the government withholds (the rumor message itself). Accordingly, “forwarding rumors” becomes a means of breaking through the government’s censorship, or information blockade. Others consider the government’s accusations of rumor as an attempt to force people into passivity instead of discussing and questioning certain events. In other words, the accusation itself has been used by government to discourage people from joining the discussion and deliberation—in short, the act of communication with each other—on certain issues. Accordingly, “forwarding rumors” becomes a means of *facilitating communication* among people, urging each other to keep an eye on these issues. By and large, as the most immediately influential feature, “to circulate [a rumor]” has been widely accepted as a clear signal of public resistance against the government—either its heavy-handed *information censorship* or its *communication suppression*. Next, I elaborate on these two initiatives and their implications in more detail.

Rumor communication as resistance to information censorship

Breaking the silence of government and mass media—as the cases of the earthquake and chemical explosion show—mobile phone rumors express people’s discontent with government censorship of information, propaganda stories, and lack of transparency in institutional channels.

Under the influence of information censorship, the lack of transparency is increasingly becoming a major trigger of the unrestrained rumor mill in contemporary China. According to a survey from *the China Youth Daily* (*zhongguo qingnian bao*), the official newspaper of the Communist Youth League committee, 73.1% of Chinese

people attribute the proliferation of rumor to a lack of transparency of authorities (Xiang, 2011). The distrust, discontent, and even resentment resulting from the lack of transparency of authorities has become even more obvious when people are situated in uncertain or ambiguous situations, such as in the case of the earthquake rumor in Shanxi. As one interviewee complains, “there is no announcement or explanation at all on why these drills had been carried out”¹ when local residents suffered from emotional distress due to fear of an impending earthquake. “We cannot help discussing why government and local media remain silent,” adds another interviewee. “There is consequently a widespread belief that government intentionally hides information about earthquakes because it fears triggering public panic from earthquake prediction.”²

As a result, forwarding this kind of government-hidden or -censored information—what government prevents people from knowing—becomes a way to break through the government-imposed censorship. With the help of mobile phones in particular, people have found an easy, low-cost way to fight against information blockage—you just need to twiddle the mobile keyboard with your thumbs to forward what government asserts to be “rumor.”

Moreover, social discontent never eases even after governmental rumor denial because people treat this kind of rumor denial as a means to mitigate people’s anxiety or anger in an attempt to avoid panic or collective actions instead of “true” rumor denial. In other words, because citizens do not believe the government to be a credible source of information, governmental rumor denial has been perceived as another way for government to cheat the people. For instance, as one interviewee complained about the earthquake case:

¹ Telephone interview with a 35-year-old civil servant in Shanxi March 2010.

² Telephone interview with a 54-year-old laid-off worker in Shanxi, October 2010.

There would be no “earthquake rumors” if government would explain the reason [for earthquake drills]. However, the government remained silent for around 40 days, ever since the emergence of the first earthquake rumor at the beginning of January. Only after realizing that it was unable to control the situation [panic] did it deny the rumors, but still without any explanation.¹

For Chinese people, as a result, rumor accusations and denials only reinforce perceptions of censorship. Fear and anxiety become exacerbated by these mobile phone rumors, while both discontent against and anger towards authorities intensify. As one interviewee sums up:

[T]o go against the monolithic system of newscasting permitted only by government, the first and foremost thing to do is to reveal those stories hidden or banned by authorities. The so-called “rumor” is always the truth censored by authorities.²

Against this backdrop, people see their mobile devices as the only reliable information channel they have beyond the official mass media. Consequently, mobile phones become a resource of public resistance against censorship. As another interviewee addresses:

¹ Telephone interviews with a resident in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, March 2011.

² Telephone interview with a 35-year-old civil servant in Shanxi, March 2010.

By calling and texting, the *only* communicative means we have, we strike back by swiftly making more people know the truth as contrasted with the official story as soon as possible. [emphasis added]¹

In sum, people spread and trust rumors because they believe that “too much information is currently covered up by government.” With no access to the whole truth, either from government or from the (government-controlled) mass media, citizens struggle to uncover and spread the truth—at the very least, what they perceive as “the truth”—through their mobile devices for themselves. People’s gullibility and reliance on mobile phone rumors stem from the government’s own failure to maintain transparency and credibility. Citizens’ efforts to break through the barriers of censorship and to find the truth have snowballed through the dissemination of mobile phone rumor.

Rumor communication as a means of fighting against communication control

Notably, this study found that people actively participate in disseminating mobile phone rumors even if they *do not believe* the rumors. In this way, mobile phone rumors express an activism against government that is rarely seen when it attempts to suppress popular discussions and opinion in the name of diminishing “rumor.” In other words, mobile phone rumors afford a relevant outlet for the growing public discontent with authorities’ adoption of repressive approaches towards “rumor” to suppress ordinary communicative activity. As in the case of anti-PX pictures, for instance, several interviewees admitted that they lacked some of the know-how to make a judgment on whether the PX plant would have a deleterious effect on local

¹ Interview with a 32-year-old taxi driver, Fuzhou, February 2011.

environment¹. Thus, they were actually unsure of what the mobile phone message warned. Nevertheless, it is the official rumor denial without any clarification that prompted them to engage in circulating “rumor” via their mobile devices regardless of being cautioned by officials. As one interviewee argued:

So-called “rumor” is just another excuse for the government to censor the PX information and, in particular, *ban* our discussions and debates. They think people dare not to argue and protest, or even to talk about this issue once authorities label it as “rumor,” let alone argue and protest against it. Because then they [the authorities] can easily eradicate different points of view by political charges, such as fabrication or distortion of facts to interfere with the social and political order. [You can] see the charge of so-called “rumormonger” against Professor Zhao Yufen! That is a living example.²

The above statement vividly shows that the interviewee treated the rumor accusation as a kind of “political persecution” from authorities of Professor Zhao.

Furthermore, the accusations of rumor and rumor-mongering shift people’s attention from specific events to government control over communicative activities and further provoke growing discontent among citizens. One respondent commented:

The government overemphasizes stability and harmony, so the way they do that is through heavy-handed control over communication. Now they try to repress every communicative act in the name of “rumor denial”!³

¹ Interviews with a 28-year-old university graduate student, a 29-year-old editor, and a 34-year-old civil servant, Xiamen, October 2010.

² Interview with a 28-year-old university student, Xiamen, October 2010.

³ Interview with a 35-year-old migrant worker, Guangzhou, May 2011.

Another adds:

Lack of transparency and failing to provide prompt information is one thing. Dampening the vigor of public debate and, worse yet, muzzling public communication in the name of “dispelling rumors” are what matters... We need channels to openly express our opinion. We need a way to make what we find out available to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible.¹

This wish inspires citizens to “ask recipients to forward the messages via mobile phone to as many people as possible.”² “They [authorities] try to ban any discussion on these topics. What we want is exactly the opposite. We want a lot more people to be involved.”³ As our interviews show, accusations from authorities always prompt outrage from citizens and stir up *huge flows of mobile phone rumor instead*. The distrust of, and anger towards local government stimulates people to spread and follow “rumor,” regardless of whether it is true or false. Also, people are not afraid of being accused of violating the law as “individual lawbreakers” committed to a “highly inflammatory cause.” Consequently, as we discussed already, something interesting commonly happens after rumor denial. More specifically, on the one hand, officials denied the rumors under a barrage of public criticism. On the other hand, over half of the interviewees repeatedly point out that “rumor” is more aggressively disseminated after government declarations⁴. *The more vehemently refutation comes out, the more*

¹ Interview with a 27-year-old white collar, Beijing, October 2010.

² Interviews with residents in Xiamen, September 2010.

³ Interview with a 38-year-old university teacher, Xiamen, September 2010.

⁴ Interviews with residents in Fuzhou, Beijing and Shanghai, February to April, 2011.

people tend to believe and circulate rumor, and the more fiercely those rumors reignite. In sum, rumor denials by authorities only add fuel to the counterattack fire.

6.6 MOBILE COMMUNICATION, “RUMOR PUBLIC,” AND A COUNTER PUBLIC SPHERE

It is through mobile phones that rumor communication not only forms a “rumor public” (Peterson & Gist, 1951), but also becomes a constituent of a counter-public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Negt & Kluge, 1993) in contemporary China.

According to Dewey (1927, cited from Shibutani, 1966: 38), a public:

...consists of people who regard themselves as likely to become involved in the consequences of an event and are sufficiently concerned to interest themselves in the possibility of control. [italics in original]

The communication of rumor, as Peterson and Gist point out, “...tends to reduce the divergence in attitudes and to produce a common definition of the situation and a common feeling or mood” (Peterson & Gist, 1951: 160). In mobile phone rumor cases in China, people move themselves together as a “rumor public” not just because they have a direct line to the event, such as an earthquake or chemical pollution (what Dewey calls “*the consequences of an event*”), but, more importantly, because they reach *a consensus* that they feel insulted, stigmatized, and incriminated by what authorities are doing—demonizing people’s concerns as “rumors” and their identities as “rumormongers” or “the many being ignorant of the truth”—and manage to fight back through their mobile devices, their own means of communication (what Dewey

calls “*interest themselves in the possibility of control*”). In addition, *guanxi*-based mobile social networks provide people with a base through which they feel connected to each other not only because they share the same consensus under certain rumor circumstances, but also because they have been socially constructed—through their *guanxi*. Accordingly, this type of rumor public binds itself closer, rather than being an “unstable collectivity” (Peterson & Gist, 1951: 160), against authorities in the context of China.

Moreover, to a certain degree, mobile phones simultaneously function as both an autonomous communication medium and an autonomous communication network beyond the traditional public communication channels (i.e., “the institutional channel”). These two characteristics accordingly contribute to a relatively independent position of the mobile phone outside of official mass media and its public sphere. Mobile communication therefore empowers and expresses those voices excluded or suppressed from the official public sphere by generating and articulating a *relatively* independent site of resistance, venting people’s doubt, discontent, anger, and disobedience to authority.

Furthermore, the counter-authority initiative of rumor communication is not based merely on reactions to governmental actions on current issues, but largely the organization of their social experience, which enables individuals to formulate interpretations of social reality. The latter, as Hansen stresses in her foreword to Negt and Kluge’s idea of counter-public sphere, lays the groundwork for “...a substantially different function of the public sphere: that of a ‘horizon of experience’, a discourse grounded in the context of everyday life, in material, psychic, and social (re-) production” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: xxx).

To be specific, by introducing the idea of “a more comprehensive ‘context of living’” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: xv), Negt and Kluge advocate reformulating the definition of the public sphere as a category related to its societal context, or the totality of society. In particular, Negt and Kluge stress *Erfahrung* [experience] as a different potential for the public sphere, which not only carries subjective feelings but also constitutes itself in a context that is not usually recognized as a legitimate public sphere, such as the routines of family life. As Hansen elaborates:

Erfahrung [experience] is seen as the matrix that mediates individual perception and social horizon of meanings, including the collective experience of alienation, isolation, and privatization.”

(Negt & Kluge, 1993: xvii-xviii)

According to Negt and Kluge, these unofficial public spheres exist and operate outside the usual parameters of institutional legitimation, responding to the contingent needs of all of those groups whose self-expression is excluded or, as Negt and Kluge put it, “blocked” from the usual arenas of public discourse.

Mobile-phone-mediated rumor communication serves as a case in point. When people hear that a rumor has been denied by authorities, it gives credence to their everyday experiences of censorship and communication suppression. Take the chemical explosion rumor as an example. According to a report from the *China Youth Daily*, a villager received a call around midnight from a friend who warned him about the explosion. When the reporter asked this villager whether or not he had verified this message, the villager asked in reply, “to verify it? If someone tells me about an explosion a hundred times, it works every time! Does it need to be verified?” (Lin,

2011) This conversation, in particular the last rhetorical question, shows that residents made and justified their decision based on their past experiences. These experiences, most of which revolve around the reality that authorities normally simply and quickly replaced rumors with their own contrived facts regardless of local residents' feelings, leaves citizens trusting the rumor without verification rather than the rumor denial from the government and its controlled mass media. More importantly, to defy government's accusations of either "rumor" or people as "the many being ignorant of the truth" with the help of its mainstream media, people employ their mobile devices to set up a relatively autonomous communication network and further generate a comparatively independent communicative sphere to go against and even challenge the official dominant discourse in the public sphere. This process, as I see it, can also be considered a type of "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2007: 246-252). More specifically, this type of mass self-communication is, first and foremost, based on "**socialized communication**" [emphasis in original] (Castells, 2007: 248) facilitated by mobile phones. Furthermore, "...it is **self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many**" [emphasis in original] (Castells, 2007: 248). In other words, the rumor content in this process of mass self-communication normally emerges from people's experience of suppression or exploitation; people make their own decisions about whom they will forward a message to—accumulating their individual experiences to a collective one through mobile communication; and people accept the rumor based on their everyday experience. This process happens as many people circulate the [same or similar] rumor spontaneously within their mobile social network. By mass self-communicating rumor via their mobile phones, people *consciously* take (communicative) resources (i.e., the mobile phone) that are available to them as weapons of resistance, struggling

to generate and consolidate a *counter-authority discourse* as powerful as the hegemonic one from the authorities and, further, a counter-public sphere as influential as the public sphere dominated by government-controlled mass media. In this way, although individuals are *unorganized* (i.e., nobody ask them to spread rumor), they still initiate and engage themselves in a form of collective resistance by disseminating rumor via their mobile phones *consciously* and *coincidentally*.

Consequently, as Cheng Yizhong, the former chief editor of *the Southern Metropolis Daily*, once commented:

Rumors are powerful weapons for the masses to oppose official propaganda and lies. Rumors are not facts, but they are much more real than facts; rumors do not stand up to scrutiny, but they are more convincing than truth; rumors are full of holes, but that does not stop the masses from firmly believing them.

(Cheng, 2011)

In all, rumor communication via mobile phones expresses the experiences of the dominated mass, although they are not politically conscious of what they have been articulating, which are still necessary and will take on different organizational forms than in situations of heavy class struggles or revolutions. Mobile phone rumors can be seen as the communicative dimension of the counter-public sphere in this process, a sphere of resistance and political discussion that expresses the experiences of the dominated. It emerges in the process of struggle, and is itself a form of struggle, organization, and public resistance.

6.7 MOBILE PHONE RUMOR AS ONLINE PUBLIC RESISTANCE

In his study of SMS in China, He (2008: 182) reveals that SMS messaging has matured to become “a major carrier of the nonofficial discourse universe,” when “the official universe occupies all the public spaces of expression, especially the Party-/state-controlled mass media.” As this study further reveals, rumor communication through the mobile phone emerges as a further form of counter-power/counter-authority at the grassroots level—against not just information censorship but also, and most importantly, communication control and political manipulation by authorities, instead of merely a kind of unofficial communication to reduce collective anxiety. The emergence of rumors displays a deep-seated distrust of authorities in the first instance. “Resistance identity” or “identity for resistance,” (Castells, 2010: 8-9) has been generated then, through mobile phone rumor circulation, by people who are in a position of being “devalued” or “stigmatized” as “the many being ignorant of the truth” in official rhetoric. Meanwhile, rumor communication via mobile phones organizes people’s lived experience and articulates a “counter-public sphere” against the official public sphere. In this way, as the figure (Figure 6.2) demonstrates, the rumor via mobile phone evolves through three stages from (a) unofficial communication, via (b) a form of counter-authority action, to (c) an emerging form of *online* public resistance. To be more specific, in the first stage, the mobile phone rumor frequently comes out as a form of unofficial communication as the official channels of communication in contemporary China fail to provide enough, and more importantly, credible information. The government’s routine silence and, particularly, denial in the face of such rumors have easily provoked an uncomfortable backlash

from China's increasingly unsubmitive citizens. Accordingly, in the second stage, spreading rumor, in particular after the authorities deny it or even crack down on its dissemination, has been counted as a kind of counter-authority action against information censorship and/or communication control. The more people voluntarily engage in rumor-spreading behaviors, the larger influence mobile-phone-rumor-facilitated, unofficial communicative sphere generates. In this way, in the third stage, circulating officially labeled "rumors" via mobile devices in contemporary China has been widely perceived as a way to contradict official stories and demonstrate civil disobedience, further turning into a new form of *online* public resistance.

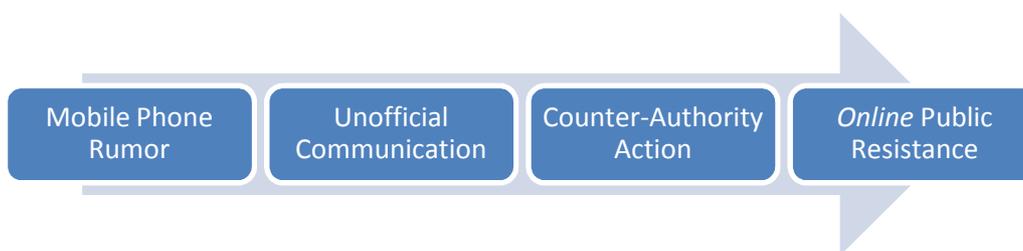


Figure 6.2 Mobile phone rumor as online public resistance in contemporary China

To be clear, after finding it impossible to restrain information flows in the new-media era, the Chinese government and its dedicated censors attempted to defend their control over information and communication by eliminating "rumormongers" or the spread of "rumor." Moreover, the dominant regime has tried to impose its own definition of "rumor" and "rumormongers," not only on the behavior of subordinate classes, but on their consciousness as well. This is what Scott warns: "[T]he critical implication for hegemony is that class rule is effected not so much by sanctions and coercion as by the consent and passive compliance of subordinate classes" (Scott, 1985: 315-316). To be clear, the official assertion and accusation aim to not only

obliterate rumors, but also to deprive people of their legitimate rights to free speech and information flow, and further to silence people's comments, doubts, and questions about "the official story" by establishing deterrence. The compression and suppression of communication have many and weighty negative repercussions for the cohesiveness of citizens who lack effective means of expression and interaction, leaving the general population at the mercy of government-controlled mass media as well as the dominant public sphere.

The situation starts to change when hundreds of citizens frequently and eagerly join the process of delivering government-labeled "rumor" messages within their mobile social network. Those people, who ricochet mobile phone rumors, not only worry about the lack of information, transparency, and formal channels for discussing demands and grievances, but also want to show their dissatisfaction with official suppression and demonization of their legitimate right to communication. In this process, mobile devices become the most common and effective way for people to facilitate communication and defy rumor accusation. In fact, the assertion and accusation of "rumor" now personifies an enduring grievance: the belief that government routinely invents haphazard accusations that frequently leave people believing they live in an unjust society where freedom and legitimate speech and communication are automatically curtailed by the official goal of eliminating "rumor." Authorities who take care of rumor denial and rumor controls have thus been delegitimized and have steadily lost their sanctioning power. Instead, rumors are accelerated and accredited—whether the message is true or not is of little importance. *The emotions of resistance*, rather than the content itself, spread quickly through mobile phone rumors. In other words, rumors via mobile phones facilitate a kind of "meta-communication" (Jensen, 2010: 99-100), in which the communicative

relationships and, most importantly, the communicators' *experiences* have the dominant impact on whether—and to what extent—rumor communication as a form of public resistance will go on. Consequently, rumor denial from the government in this context is no longer a way of stopping rumor circulation, but a full-fledged accomplice in rumor proliferation.

In this context, to circulate mobile phone rumors also becomes a simple yet basic way for each person to implicitly voice his\her suspicions of, distrust of, resistance to, and even challenges of the dominant public sphere and its hegemonic discourse. Obviously, this action displays a gesture of political confrontation against a government call that: “[people should] not trust rumors, not spread rumors, and not give rumormongers with ulterior motives more room to operate” (Ren, 2011), on the one hand, and violates law and regulation laid out by the government, on the other hand. Additionally, in citizens' minds, the more people who join in the dissemination of rumors, the louder the clamor of those who are unjustly oppressed grows. In other words, the aim of circulating mobile phone rumor is not only to reveal the truth, which has been covered-up (e.g., unusual deaths), or to embarrass those individuals or institutions (e.g., local government) in power, but also to mobilize citizens to bring about a different function of the communication sphere that might reach beyond the limits of the dominant public sphere. Benefitting from the low-cost and user-friendly operation of mobile devices, people with all levels of literacy have been empowered by their mobile phones, a familiar communication technology, to actively resist government. This phenomenon *lowers* the average protest threshold—protest does not always mean organizing or joining a demonstration—you just move your finger to send or forward those messages claimed to be “rumors” by the government.

In the Chinese *guanxi*-network, mobile phone rumor is a sight to behold. The mutual identification and recognition of both sides in mobile communication enhances not only the credibility of mobile messages, but also the reliability between each party. Because a text message is not anonymous, it has a huge emotional impact and encourages users to embrace mobile phone rumors and throw themselves into the resistance. The circulation of mobile phone rumor in the *guanxi*-embedded mobile social network is thus more like "...a social movement with no formal organization, no formal leaders, no manifestoes, no dues, no name, and no banner" (Scott, 1985: 35). In this way, public resistance grows through mobile-phone-rumor circulation. The swift proliferation of mobile phone rumors connects each user and creates a non-violent counter-authority universe.

Notably, consensus has emerged among Chinese mobile phone users that "to circulate is to support [the suppressed voice] and to communicate is to popularize [the truth]."¹ This consensus shows that distributing rumor through a personal mobile device may be an individual action, but this is not to say that it is uncoordinated. Even though nobody knows where and when a "rumor" will come up again, everyone positions himself/herself to spread it through his/her mobile phone, a means of resistance that is not just local, but also national and "require[s] little coordination" (Scott, 1985: 297).

*In some cases, people also exploit the terminology of "rumor" in a strategic way to facilitate the dissemination of certain messages. Citizens add some notes at the beginning of a message to call for re-sending messages to as many people as possible before "it has been censored," or "it becomes a 'rumor'."*² Under this circumstance,

¹ "转发即是救援，传播便是普及。" A similar phenomenon can be observed in the *Weibo*, China's microblogging platform, for instance, see <http://www.weibo.com/1700757973/ylpTW3vqi>, accessed August 1, 2012.

² Telephone interviews with journalists in Zengcheng and Shenzhen, November 2010.

people seize the opportunity of snowballing “rumor” to voice their dissatisfaction and vent their fury over a government response. Receivers find a wealth of motivation from this sentence to pass on these kinds of chain messages that counter authorities. The use of “rumor” here differs in that it is arguably a call to arms or, more precisely, a call on people to actively engage, as a protest of current conditions, and as a weapon to puncture the veil surrounding censorship as well as to break the control over communication. In other words, “rumor” here is mostly symbolic but highlights its growing presence as a sort of resistance power loaded with antagonistic sentiments and, increasingly, as a strategy of struggle to facilitate communication outside official channels. It is in this sense that the mobile phone rumor becomes a key part of “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1985) at the grassroots level. It challenges power by “challenging the normal channels of challenging power and revealing the truth” (Žižek, 2011: 10).

6.8 CONCLUSION

Considering how prevalent rumors are in Chinese society today, there is a dearth of research on how rumors thrive and why people spread them. This chapter considers the characteristics and nature of rumor with a special focus on rumor spread through mobile phones. It goes beyond simply demonizing the rumor as “a subjective and deliberate fabrication” as the government and mass media in contemporary China do. By carefully analyzing rumor’s dissemination, interpretation, and implication in our cases, we observe that mobile-phone–facilitated rumor has evolved into a special form of resistance at the grassroots level.

With the click of a button, people disseminate rumors through a mobile phone, whereby they show their suspicions about, distrust of, and challenges toward government, or involve themselves in resistances against authorities. Mobile phones thus lower the average protest threshold and vent long pent-up resentments against the entrenched authoritarian regime. Most importantly, they bring an unprecedented opportunity for people, especially those without complicated communication skills (e.g., tweeting, online chatting, or circumventing censorship [*fanqiang*]), to raise their own voices, to resist and disregard authorities' orders, to show their disobedient attitudes, and to carry out uncooperative activities. Simultaneously, communication on mobile phones happens in [a close-knit] network where everyone knows everyone else. Engaging with someone you already know greatly increases both the credibility of messages and the sense of security of participation. Last but not least, the prevalence of mobile devices and synchronous mobile communication accumulates rumor discourse into large-scale resistance over a very short time. All of these variables cause mobile-phone-facilitated rumor to have a crucial impact on contemporary Chinese society. The emergence, circulation, and proliferation of mobile phone rumors—although, to certain extent, leading to panic and mass incidents—serve to undermine the legitimacy of the regime. In particular, the diffusion of mobile phone rumors accumulates a power of resistance against the official hegemonic discourse and control of communications, including the use of the accusation of “rumor” to stifle any different voices and ordinary communicative activities. Mobile communication is perceived as the only platform on which people can express and share their opinions, while, to some extent, interacting with each other outside of government control. Mobile phone rumor thus cultivates the *political*

affordances of mobile media as a vehicle of both empowerment and mobilization at the grassroots level.

Although the pervasive mobile phone rumor phenomenon mostly appears as a kind of *virtual* nonviolent resistance, which creates a seemingly untenable and widening gap between the government and the public—one without obvious and observable consequences—it also offers the possibility of mobilizing millions of angry people and empowering them through social organization, the likes of which the government heretofore successfully prevented from ever emerging. The refusals to accept the definition of rumor provided by the authorities and to condone their own social, political, and communicative marginalization, albeit not sufficient, are surely necessary for any further resistance, especially *offline* popular protests—which is the focus of next chapter.

7. MOBILE ACTIVISM IN CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

Mobile Phones, Popular Protests, and the Counter-Public Sphere¹

7.1 “MOBILE-PHONE–FACILITATED POPULAR PROTEST” IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

The growing importance of mobile media in popular protests has attracted considerable attention around the world as an increasing number of people are appropriating and domesticating their mobile phones for the *real-world* mobilization of collective action and the subsequent initiation, organization, and implementation of social movements (Rheingold, 2002; Rafael, 2003; Suárez, 2006; Hermanns, 2008). In the spring of 2011, for instance, the world watched as online and mobile-phone–facilitated, twitter-based revolutionary fervor swept the Middle East (Hounshell, 2011). As one of the latest eye-catching mobile-phone–facilitated rebellions, the “Twitter Revolution” not only mobilizes widespread offline protests, but also prompts further study of the role of the mobile phone in popular protests in the wake of the increasing use of mobile devices in social activism, social movements, and contentious politics.

The proliferation of mobile phones in China also nurtures growing mobile-phone–facilitated popular protests, with the increasing use of mobile media as a key resource

¹ A revised version of this chapter will appear as Jun Liu (2012, forthcoming). Mobile Communication, Popular Protests and Citizenship in China, *Modern Asian Studies*.

for not just proliferating censored information¹, but more importantly facilitating demonstrations and strikes² and triggering mass incidents³. Nevertheless, very few studies address systematically the role of mobile phones in *offline* traditional forms of popular protests, let alone communication via mobile phones and its political implications in contemporary China, leaving this field almost blank.

Aiming to fill that void, this chapter examines spontaneous offline mobilization via mobile phones, with a focus on two concrete popular protests in rural and urban areas: the 2007 Xiamen anti-PX demonstration and the 2008 Weng'an mass incident. These case studies demonstrate how Chinese citizens have expanded the political uses of mobile phones in their struggles for freedom of information flow and communicative practice, social justice, and the rule of law, while seeking to build an inexpensive counter-public sphere. Furthermore, I elaborate on 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 offline protest events, this type of mobile activism is considered a “mobile-phone-facilitated popular protest.”

Because of the sensitive nature of popular protests, one always meets with difficulties in discovering what is really happening. The first problem is a “media censorship barrier”: the difference between what really happens and what is covered. In most cases, popular protest is only known by the masses after its public exposure in the traditional media. The second problem is a “sensitivity barrier”: the difference between what has been found out and what information is available for academia. No

¹ For instance, spreading what is officially labeled “rumor” as the previous chapter on mobile phone rumors shows.

² For instance, the text-message-mobilized peaceful *sanbu* against chemical plants in Xiamen in 2007 that have potentially negative effects on the environment (China Newsweek, 2007).

³ For instance, the mobile-phone-triggered Weng'an and Shishou riots in 2008 and 2009, respectively.

country, including China, is willing to disclose to the public or academia all the information they hold on popular protests. To overcome these difficulties, and in particular to gain people's real-life experience, this study employed a qualitative approach (i.e., in-depth interview) to obtain a deeper understanding of people's actions and practices during popular protests¹. In addition, I also obtained information from publications and media reports of popular protests as objects of analysis.

I first present a brief description of the two sample cases. Second, I examine how people in these cases represent "the communication have-nots"² by specifically looking at the control and manipulation of communication by governments. Third, I elucidate the role of the mobile phone for the communication have-nots in creating a new way of articulating everyday experience, mobilizing popular protests, and facilitating a counter-public sphere against the hegemonic discourse in the dominant public sphere. Fourth, I generalize the implications of mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests and, more importantly, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere for political participation and civic engagement by ordinary Chinese people. This chapter contributes to contemporary research on political protest (a) by emphasizing the integration of mobile communication technologies into discussions of digital democracy and the public sphere, (b) by applying this approach to an empirical study of critical mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests, and (c) by analyzing the influence of mobile phones on contemporary China's public sphere.

7.2 THE MOBILE PHONE IN OFFLINE POPULAR PROTESTS:

Cases in China

¹ For a detailed discussion on criteria of case selection, the sampling method, and the framework of the interview, see *Chapter Four*.

² See detailed discussion on "the communication have-nots" in *Chapter Two*.

7.2.1 Mobile phones, the anti-PX stroll, and policy overthrow in Xiamen

The Xiamen PX project, estimated to generate an annual revenue of 80 billion CNY (10.4 billion USD) 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 (SEPA) which gave it the go-ahead in July 2005 (China Newsweek, 2007). Nevertheless, the campaigns against the Xiamen PX project unexpectedly started in early 2006 by homeowners of the Future Coast, “a so-called No.1 health coastal residential community in Xiamen” (China.org.cn, 2008). The letters and emails of complaints from residents about “an awful stench from a nearby wastewater treatment plant and a sour taste from a big chemical plant” (China.org.cn, 2008) to both state and local governments and environmental watchdogs received no response. Later, Zhao Yufen, a U.S.-trained chemistry professor at Xiamen University and a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), a leading academic institution in natural science, organized a petition in which six CAS academicians (included Zhao) and 104 other CPPCC members enumerated the possible safety consequences and pollution risks of the 300-acre factory complex, only 7 kilometers away from the city center, during the “two Congresses” in March 2007. They supported calls for the project to be relocated but accomplished nothing. Instead, the construction of the PX plant was in fact accelerated (Huang, 2007). All these ratifications and arguments, little known to the residents in Xiamen¹, had not come to public attention until a popular text-message was sent via mobile phone in mid-March after the “two Congresses.” This message, which was spread countrywide,

¹ During our interviews, none of the interviewees had received the information about the PX plant from local government or local media as the first source. Also see Buckley (2007).

argued that the PX project would be detrimental to the environment and public health¹. 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!

One version of the text message, quoted above, called upon people to spread such information as soon as possible to as many people as possible. These kinds of messages communicated to an unprecedented degree not only to the people in Xiamen and their relatives, but also those who once lived or studied in Xiamen². Against this backdrop, reportedly, the phrase “did you receive the [PX-related] SMS?” became the opening remark when Xiamen citizens met each other in the following three months³. There was a great stir among the citizens after this information spread. The common question was: since the placement of the chemical plant in Xiamen is vitally connected to public interests, why was this never disclosed?⁴ The documents in 2006

¹ The earliest time that anyone received the mobile message was March 11, 2007. Interviews with residents in Xiamen, May, 2007, and September, 2010.

² Interviews with undergraduate and graduate students in Fuzhou, Guangzhou, and Shanghai who once spent years studying in Xiamen, 2007 and 2009. Some of their schoolmates, who still used the Xiamen mobile phone number, also got those messages at that time, even though they were already studying abroad.

³ Interviews with residents in Xiamen, 2007. Also see Zhu (2007).

⁴ Interviews with residents in Xiamen, December 2010.

from the State Council and SEPA¹ both specified that public consultations must be held in cases where a project will have an impact on the public's environmental interests.

Public opposition accordingly began to build through the internet². Noticing this situation, local government started to block rather than clarify the PX-related information, using the conventional censorship paradigms, including blockage of access to news, shutting down online forums and public BBSes³ (e.g., “Little Fish” and the bulletin board system of Xiamen University), jamming sensitive words from websites⁴, and hammering out various schemes to paint the critical PX-related reports from outsider media as “yellow journalism” to spoil Xiamen's image⁵. The press in Xiamen, on the other hand, failed to inform local residents about the controversies and objections raised against the PX project until May 28, 2007, announcing instead that it was “a great project” “being approved under the laws and regulations,” in effect trying to justify the local authority's decision and force local residents to accept the chemical plant (Reporter, 2007a, 2007b).

However, that action further 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 protest⁶. One read,

¹ The documents include “Decision on Implementing the Scientific Concept of Development and Stepping up Environmental Protection by the State Council” (Council, 2006) and “the Temporary Act of Environmental Impact Assessment of Public Participating” (SEPA, 2006).

² Interviews with residents and former students in Xiamen University, December 2010.

³ Interviews with residents in Xiamen, December 2010.

⁴ Interview with a webmaster of Baidu *Tieba*, 2010.

⁵ For instance, the Publicity Department of Xiamen University published “the brief announcement of Zhao Yufen,” which asserted that Prof. Zhao had never been interviewed and never authorized any media to express her opinions concerning the PX project. In contrast, Huang Han, a journalist from the *Oriental Weekly* (*liaowang dongfang zhoukan*), argued that the announcement was intended to negate the interviews of Zhao Yufen by outsider news media, including *Oriental Weekly*, and frame the accusation of mendacious reports. See <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/1676634/>, accessed November 20, 2009.

⁶ Some reports said this message was definitely first sent on 25 March. See Asia Sentinel (2007).

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 tied with yellow ribbons¹! Pass this message on to all your Xiamen friends!

Residents at the same time continued to comment during daily discussions or through mobile exchanges, voicing their anger toward the government's aloof and indifferent attitude in the face of their growing anxiety. Later, local government announced in haste a decision to "halt construction temporarily" but without any details about the postponement. Consequently, residents still complained that a postponement of the project from local government was not the same as canceling, voicing great suspicion that it was a delaying tactic used in the hopes that people would forget and move on. The apex of the anti-PX movement occurred after "millions of Xiamen residents forwarding the [above] same text message around their mobile phones" (Lan & Zhang, 2007) from May 28, urging people to join a street protest opposing the government's chemical plant.

Taking note of this circumstance, the government asked the various departments to prepare to work on stabilizing the masses². But on June 1, around 20,000 people still took to the streets and staged a peaceful "stroll" from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., to signal their unhappiness with the government's decision that they feared would ruin their health in the long run. This "stroll" pushed the movement to a higher level of mobilization and drew national and international publicity (Associated Press, 2007; China Newsweek, 2007; Asia Sentinel, 2007; Xinhua, 2007; China.org.cn, 2008). Slogans of "Stop construction, postponement is not enough" became a key demand from the

¹ A yellow ribbon is a symbol associated with environmental protection in the anti-PX march.

² For instance, local schools told students they would be expelled if they took to the streets. Interviews with a student, a journalist, a civil servant, and local residents, Xiamen, July 2007 and December 2010.

demonstrators¹. Around 10:30 a.m., demands against PX were competing for airtime with more sensitive political slogans—particularly for the resignation of the city’s party secretary². As the march went on, many people, including passers-by, pulled out their mobile phones and took pictures and videos. Some of them sent live updates from their mobile phone to their friends, webpages, blogs, or video sites (Kennedy, 2007). In addition, many videos of the march were uploaded to YouTube³. Bullog, one of the websites with live reports, saw over 40,000 hits in just 4 hours during the demonstration.

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” (China.org.cn, 2008). The turnout had occurred. Three days after the demonstrations, *the People’s Daily* ran a front-page editorial condemning local officials who had disregarded President Hu Jintao’s admonitions to preserve the environment (“Work Hard to Tackle Difficult Tasks for Energy Saver and Exhaust Reducer,” 2007). The local government in Xiamen immediately announced the decision to halt construction and, six months later, relocated the plant to Gulei Peninsula, a strip of fishing villages far less populous and developed, in a process that included public participation in the environmental appraisal (China.org.cn, 2008).

To sum up, the Xiamen anti-PX demonstration both resulted from and changed the dynamics of mobile phone and popular protest. It shows that a new mode of spontaneous and voluntarily self-organized political participation and mobilizing structures as well as information dissemination beyond the traditional media enabled by low-cost mobile communication has diffused into the norms of collective actions

¹ Interviews with a civil servant who works in the Xiamen municipal government building and with local residents, Xiamen, July 2007 and December 2010.

² Interviews with local residents, Xiamen, December 2010.

³ See, for instance, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfzMg0x3KIk>, accessed November 2, 2010.

in contentious politics against the inertia and systematic obstructions from the entrenched bureaucracy of Chinese society.

7.2.2 Mobile phones and the mass incident in Weng'an in rural China

Mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests have occurred not only in urban areas; they have also intensified escalating clashes, associated rumors, and unexpected mass incidents in the countryside. On June 28, 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 over a 16-year-old girl's "unusual death" (Buckley, 2008; Xinhuanet, 2008; Ding, 2008).

Weng'an, a remote county in Guizhou Province, is poor and low literacy is common. Per capita income among farmers—who account for 90% of the county's 460,000 people—is just 2,000 CNY (292.6 USD) a year (Luo, 2008). The chaos started in Weng'an County on the afternoon of June 28 when people who were dissatisfied with the medical and legal expertise on the death of a local female student gathered at the county government and public security bureau. The local girl by the name of Li Shufen was found dead in a river on June 22 after being spotted going out with her classmates Wang Jiao and two adolescents. On that day, the police retrieved Li's body and detained these three suspects. After a postmortem examination, the local government declared Li had committed suicide by leaping into the river, but the girl's relatives refused to accept the results and claimed she had been killed. After the police released the three suspects unconditionally the next day without any interrogation or statement-taking, there were lots of versions, variations, and recombinations of Li's death. Some said that Wang Jiao and the two young men, who have familial ties with

the local public security bureau, raped and killed Li and then tossed her body into the river afterward. An alternative competing with the rape angle had these three students taking revenge because Li refused to pass tips to them during an exam. Li's family therefore went to petition at the county party committee office. After police refused the petition for a thorough examination of Li Shufen's corpse, tension mounted. The rumor that the relatives were assaulted by the policemen instead of getting justice then floated about¹. Some mobile-phone 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.

(Buckley, 2008)

This message drew the anger of the public and later sparked conflicts. The death of the girl became intertwined with corrupt government officials, merciless policemen, and perceived injustice across the small county. The rumors about the injustices rolled bigger and bigger, but these were clearly ignored by the government. At around 3 p.m. on June 28, according to *the Southern Weekend (nanfang zhoumo)* (Ding, 2008), two middle school students raised a banner saying "Justice for the people," and several dozen followers marched behind them on behalf of Li Shufen. But none of these marchers were relatives of Li Shufen. Mobile-phone text messages and calls mobilized almost 10,000 people who went to the public security bureau building where they smashed and burned all the police vehicles parked there (Yu, 2008). *Ming*

¹ The Hong Kong media later interviewed the uncle of the deceased girl, and his comments on camera and the follow-up mainland media reports showed firstly he had not been beaten to death. Secondly, he was beaten by unidentified persons. See *The Guizhou Daily* (2008). Later it was also proven that the three suspects were farmers' children and were not protected by favoritism. Nevertheless, as we will discuss later, the truth to a certain degree does not matter in this case.

Pao reported that it seemed “the entire population of the county [was] outside the public security bureau office building” (Reporter, 2008).

Different from Xiamen’s demonstration, the mass incident in Weng’an, as a turning point in the model of collective opposition, exposes not only the flare-up of intolerable contradictions between some local governments and residents during the process of structural transformation of Chinese society, but also a low public credibility of official organizations and mass media. Mobile networks linking people together became a direct weapon of rebellion against the local government.

7.3 THE COMMUNICATION HAVE-NOTS IN URBAN AND RURAL CHINA

At first glance, people may say that the anti-PX demonstration in Xiamen and the mass incident in Weng’an are two independent events, except that both include the mobile phone as the mobilization tool. These two events took place in two different sets of circumstances (urban and rural areas), they include two distinct groups (the emerging middle class and the left-behind rural population, respectively), and the reasons for these two events are entirely different (environment protection and justice-seeking). However, if we look at the people in these two events from the perspective of communication, we will note that both groups are under communication constraints, or even being deprived of a means of expression and communication, before they appropriate their mobile devices to initiate communication and facilitate protests against the authorities. In other words, under the stern control of communication by governments, both the middle class in Xiamen and the rural population in Weng’an become the communication have-nots.

7.3.1 The communication have-nots in the Xiamen case

In the case of Xiamen, local government exerted tight control over communication in the following three ways. First, local government prevented the spread of reports that covered the PX project by the media outside Xiamen in order to keep its residents from knowing about both this project and the arguments against it. In the Chinese media system, local authority has direct control over the media and communication system within its territorial reach through its propaganda department. But one local authority has no direct power to intervene in reports by the media that are outside its territorial reach. As a result, after some media outside Xiamen—such as the Shenzhen-based *Phoenix Weekly* (*fenghuang zhoukan*) and the Beijing-based *Chinese Business* (*zhongguo jingying bao*) (Qu, 2007)—covered Professor Zhao Yufen’s petition in Beijing, the only thing local government could do was to impose censorship to stop the circulation of these reports in Xiamen. The local government did so in practice. For instance, *Phoenix Weekly*, trying to bring the potentially hazardous PX project into the public eye, was seized by the authorities and quickly pulled from shelves in Xiamen¹.

Second, local government made use of its various resources, including local media, the public security agency, and the education system, to try to forbid the discussion of the PX issue by both scholars and ordinary residents in public, let alone questioning or arguing against this project. After the text messages—including warnings concerning the potentially dangerous effect of the PX project—broke government’s censorship, anxious residents were eager to know more about the project and, particularly, the petition for the effect that this project would have on the surrounding area. Without a

¹ Interviews with residents, Xiamen, June 2007 and December 2008.

doubt, the public had its sights immediately on Professor Zhao, who initiated the petition. However, local government immediately sent orders through its education bureau to Zhao, forcing her to keep quiet (Tu, 2007; Qian & Bandurski, 2011: 66-70). The scholars of environmental protection in Xiamen University were also urged not to discuss the PX-related issues in public. In addition, local government asserted that the negative messages about the PX project through the internet, emails, and mobile phones were a “rumor,” which had been spread by certain rumor mongers with “a deliberate aim” to sabotage the reputation of Xiamen city¹. This kind of accusation included, for instance, a commentary on the website of the local party organ, *Xiamen Daily*, which rebuked Zhao for not having “true expertise” and knowing little about environmental protection. Consequently, in official discourse “she [Zhao] was manufacturing *rumors* to mislead the public” [emphasis added] and “...was deliberately trying to ruin the image of Xiamen.”² To further eliminate discussions of this topic, local government quickly closed several online forums, including “Little Fish” and the bulletin board system (BBS) of Xiamen University, in the name of “preventing rumor spreading.” Public security agencies also announced that they had launched covert surveillance in order to identify what the government called “rumor mongers,” bringing a chilling effect on people’s daily conversations³.

Third, local government took advantage of its media resources to advocate the PX project and try to legitimize its construction in the dominant public sphere. After the anti-PX text messages proliferated in Xiamen, local government attempted to address the PX project as a legitimation project by running its propaganda machine. For instance, *Xiamen Business Daily* (*Xiamen Shangbao*), one of the local media, published reports on May 28 and 31, respectively, saying that “the Haicang PX

¹ Interviews with residents in Xiamen, September 2010.

² Interviews with residents, Xiamen, September 2010. Also see *The Sun* (2007).

³ Interviews with residents, Xiamen, September 2010.

project has already been approved according to nationally recognized legal procedures and is under construction” (Reporter, 2007a) and that “the Haicang PX project has been approved by the national regulations on investment and management” (Reporter, 2007b). Even without a close reading of the content we can easily figure out that these reports strongly emphasized that the PX project had been approved according to the laws and regulations; in other words, this project was “legal” and residents should accept it.

It is worth pointing out that the reporters for these reports are anonymous. When I had my interviews with an editor in *Xiamen Business Daily*, she explained that,

...they [these reports] are purely propaganda stories from the propaganda department instead of reports. Therefore, we have no choice but to publish them according to propaganda directives. But none of us want his/her name to appear with this kind of propaganda stories. So we wrote down “reporter” as the author...We [the media] are not allowed to do any report independently on the project, let alone question it.¹

Here, just the same as scholars and ordinary residents, journalist and editors have also been deprived of their rights to voice their suspicions, question the project, or investigate it in public communication.

To summarize, local government in Xiamen ensured its hegemonic voice about the PX project issue in public communication with a range of comprehensive measures. The government not only banned the media reports on the PX project and replaced them with propaganda stories, but also imposed a systematic control over

¹ Online interview with an editor of *Xiamen Business News*, December 2009.

communication in schools, companies, government agencies, and people's everyday lives in general. In this way, local government tries to legitimize its decision—the construction of the PX project—and force people to accept this decision. Against this backdrop, residents in Xiamen became the communication have-nots in the face of local authorities' stern communication constraint.

7.3.2 The communication have-nots in the Weng'an Case

The case of Weng'an shows a similar picture with reference to government control over communication. According to reports, the controversial death of the female student was in fact an occasion that ignited the long-lasting tension between government and people (Ding, 2008; Zhang, Zhu, & Huang, 2008). Prior forced demolition and land grabbing by local government, lack of employment, and corrupt government practices resulted in a deep-rooted dissatisfaction with local authority among residents (Zhao, Zhou, & Liu, 2008). Moreover, local government officials and public security agencies employed mafia-style gangs to stifle public grievance and suppress public outcry by conniving with these gangs and offering them "protection umbrellas." Consequently, local residents not only had no place to redress their grievances, but they also suffered from a lack of a sense of security in daily life. Shi Zhongyuan, the Guizhou provincial party secretary, admitted in a later report that,

...Weng'an is unsafe. The residents dare not speak the truth [to local authority].... Local government is unable to stop the bad people and the masses are suffering. Weng'an is unsafe. The good people cannot defeat the bad ones.

(Ding, 2008)

In other words, with the help of mafia-style gangs, the “rude and roughshod solutions” of local authority to “resolve”—to hold back, in fact—public grievances and disputes over land, the forced demolition of private homes, and so on had forced local residents into silence, turning them into the communication have-nots.

Moreover, after the mass incident broke out, the local government tried to establish its dominant discourse on this event and asserted it as a “riot” by deliberate control and manipulation of communication. On the one hand, local government seized control over journalists, in particular those from the media outside Weng’an city. For instance, Wang Weibo, a reporter from the China News Service (CNS)-affiliated *China Newsweek* (*zhongguo xinwen zhoukan*), found that if reporters do not register with local government and follow its rule, they will not get any cooperation from it—which means you are not able to get access to the people you want to interview; if you do cooperate, local officials will provide “full company” with you during your interviews, in particular when you interview with the family members of the deceased (Ma, 2008). With this kind of direct supervision, local government attempts to tightly control not just journalists’ every movement, but also what they talk about with their interviewees and the interviewees’ responses. On the other hand, local government makes a conscious effort to deliver information that is in favor of itself. For instance, Wang later found out that the “bulletins” provided to the media are deliberately filtered in order to propagandize government’s point of view. Realizing the power of the internet, in particular, local authority organized more than a dozen tech-savvy teachers to post comments on the internet in order to “guide online public opinion” (Ma, 2008). This group of people is exactly what I mentioned in *Chapter Two*: “*wumao dang*,” the government-paid online commentators.

In short, by the power of violence and intimidation, local government in Weng'an forced people to keep silent, submit to its authority, and obey its rules. Moreover, this government attempted to manipulate online public opinion and further legitimize its government and suppression in more subtle ways: allowing interviews but supervising the entire interviewing process to ensure everything is under its control, or recruiting internet commentators to hijack online discourse and mold public opinion in favor of local authority. The voice of people had been absent in the public sphere; accordingly, local residents in Weng'an also became the communication have-nots.

The demonstration in Xiamen and the mass incident in Weng'an took place under two distinct sets of circumstances for different reasons; the participants in these events—the middle class in Xiamen and the rural population in Weng'an—are two different groups of people. No matter what kinds of differences these groups have, both of them have been deprived of means of expression, discussion, and communication by governments. Put otherwise, the people have become the communication have-nots. Under these similar circumstances, the mobile phone becomes a key resource for the communication have-nots to facilitate communicative practices, mobilize popular protests, disseminate alternative voices outside the mainstream and government-dominated political spectrum, and further create a counter-public sphere against the authorities.

7.4 HOW THE MOBILE PHONE FACILITATES OFFLINE POPULAR PROTESTS AND EMPOWERS THE COMMUNICATION HAVE-NOTS

With the help of the mobile phone, a mundane interpersonal communication tool in everyday life, the people in Xiamen and Weng'an not only succeeded in getting rid of local government's harsh control over information and communication, breaking out of their inferior positions as the communication have-nots, but also generated groundbreaking *offline* protest movements against local authority, influencing the power dynamics between the governor and the governed. The mobile phone in these cases of popular protest performs the following five functions: (a) overcoming censorship, (b) nurturing citizen journalists, (c) facilitating peer-to-peer mobilization, (d) increasing organizational effectiveness, and (e) accumulating individual experience. Importantly, based on the communication power of the mobile phone, these tasks consequently empower the communication have-nots against the authorities.

Next, based on the matrix (Figure 7.1) given below, I elaborate on how mobile technology facilitates and further empowers offline popular protests in the context of China. More specifically, I generalize and lay out five unique functions of mobile phones in offline popular protests in the matrix. The matrix distinguishes, on the one hand, between technological and socio-cultural features and, on the other hand, between micro (individual) and macro (collective) levels features of mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests. It is necessary to mention that mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests have a technological dimension and a social-political dimension that often overlap in practice even though they are analytically distinctive from each other.

	Micro (Individual) Level	Macro (Collective) Level
Technology	(a) Overcoming censorship; (b) Citizen Journalists	(d) Organizational Effectiveness
Socio-Culture	(c) Peer-to-Peer Mobilization	(e) Experience Accumulation

Figure 7.1 How mobile technology facilitates and empowers offline protests in China

7.3.1 Overcoming censorship

In the upper left quadrant of the matrix, the term “overcoming censorship” addresses the fact that, on a micro level, communication via mobile phones is poised to breach the authority-mandated information blockade, reshaping people’s views and knowledge against the silence of local government and government-controlled media *before* offline protest activities. In other words, with the help of mobile technology, the capacity to communicate with each other beyond face-to-face communication helps people share messages (information) that are relevant to each other.

For instance, in the Xiamen protest, by virtue of the mobile device, residents broke the censorship on the PX-related issue imposed by local government, making messages that has been blocked by local authority proliferate within a short time. In Xiamen, a city of 1.5 million people, the warning text message was repeated more than 1 million times until it had reached practically every citizen there (Lan & Zhang, 2007). Within hours, the message made its way to the internet, while millions of SMS messages were circulated even more widely and quickly via mobile devices as part of the mass campaign against the plant. Specifically, mobile phones made it possible for citizens to not need to access to the internet to be warned about the negative effects from the PX plant as soon as possible. This feature maximizes the reach of information and broadens its influence. Consequently, during the demonstration, most

of the police and soldiers were just surrounding people and giving a kind of indirect support rather than blocking the demonstrators. Some of the police were even telling people during the march to make a racket if they liked, and it worked¹. As one civil servant admitted, “every person already knew very well via mobile message alerts that they and their children would suffer if the PX project goes ahead.”²

Likewise, due to a lack of access and intensive control mechanisms, the internet could hardly be considered a solution for rural inhabitants in the poverty-stricken countryside, such as the town of Weng’an. In the remote rural case, mobile phones serve as a gateway to accept and transmit messages between ordinary people against the tricky government and silent local media. More importantly, benefitting from the low cost of telecommunication and instantaneous, synchronous communication (while making synchronous communication easier as well), the rapid proliferation of text messages resulted in a quasi-mass communication effect, catching authorities and their censorship unprepared. In other words, for both the authorities and the people, it is hard to predict the exact time and the scale of the “eruption” of mobile messages, albeit some government officials have also received these messages and asked various departments to try to prevent them from spreading.

In short, the mobile phone provides the communication have-nots, particularly those without enough media literacy skills (e.g., reading the newspaper or using the internet), a convenient way to break censorship and disseminate messages that are relevant to themselves. To a degree, the power of mobile communication to break information blockage ensures people’s right to the free flow of information—to access significant information that people need.

¹ Interviews with local residents, Xiamen, 2007.

² Interview with residents, Xiamen, 2007, 2010.

7.3.2 Emergence of citizen journalism

Equally important, the mobile device as a multimedia platform generates an unprecedented opportunity to nurture and promote citizen journalism (see quadrant b in Table 7.1 on page 249) specifically for covering popular protests. In principle, the emergence of citizen journalism can be read as part of a continuing struggle against censorship, which largely comes out *during* or *after* offline popular protests. Nevertheless, the practice of citizen journalism here is more a move to strike against and bypass the media censorship on protests, riots and, other mass incidents (e.g., the anti-PX demonstration) in general, rather than the concrete triggering factor (e.g., the PX project) in particular. In other words, mobile phones break through not only the information blockages about certain politically sensitive events (e.g., the PX project), but also the official censorship on media coverage of protests or rioting, uncovering an increasingly emerging conflict between the party-state and its people and further challenging and hitting back at the official story of “a harmonious society” in the public sphere.

More specifically, calls, photos, audio, and video from multi-function mobile phones enable ordinary citizens to broadcast information in the form of SMS and MMS messaging about the demonstrations and protests to the world, bringing inevitable and irresistible attention from the public at large, the central government, and even overseas media, which in turn gives power to these citizens that they had not even envisioned. With the easy availability of mobile phones, in particular their camcorder functions, in rural and urban areas people no longer have to depend on cumbersome and suspicious-looking video cameras and computers to capture their struggles and send them to their friends. In these cases we have been discussing, “a rapidly assembling and self-documenting public” (Shirky, 2010) emerged as live reporting

scooped by ordinary citizens with on-the-spot reports gave quick responses to the events, became actively engaged in spreading information on politically sensitive topics, expressed different versions or opinions of the event and even criticism of the government, and forced the authorities to tweak its propaganda war and ham-fisted responses to challenges from below. Here, the driving force is the use of mobile phones, which allowed both the original protesters and the passers-by to broadcast protest activities to other citizens and to the wider world with remarkable speed. As a result, sources from the government and journalism are becoming a smaller part of the people's information mix. The party-controlled press is consequently no longer the sole gatekeeper of what the public knows. That power is moving away from those who cover the news, in part, to those who make the news. Even with a media blackout on news of the demonstration, the time, location, and target turnout of millions of people were spread almost exclusively by calls, SMS messages, BBS postings, and on blogs, making it a nationally and internationally observed mass demonstration.

In addition, what should not be underestimated in particular is mobile-phone-enabled, real-time reporting on protests and demonstrations. Once this kind of real-time reporting circulates through mobile communication or disseminates on the internet, it not only attracts people's eyes but also encourages them as soon as possible to come to the place where the demonstration or protest takes place and join or cover these collective actions. For instance, in the Xiamen case, several interviewees recalled that they were not so sure that a real life demonstration against local government would happen after they got the mobilizing text message. Then, on the morning of June 1, they received calls or text messages from their friends, covering the detail of the on-going anti-PX demonstration¹. As one said,

¹ For more information about the content of this kind of real-time report, see *Chapter One*.

I was so excited then. I thought I should join them [the demonstrators], be a part of this event [the anti-PX protest], reinforce our power, and make our voice louder. I immediately asked my friend [via my mobile phone] where the parade was. Then I quickly set out and went to join the demonstration.¹

In this way, the real-time reporting on protests and demonstrations served as a “call,” drawing residents to participate in protest activities, increasing the number of participants, and contributing to a larger influence.

Meanwhile, once it spreads, this kind of real-time reporting also attracts attention from the media, including foreign media, which will send out their journalists to cover these events in a short time. Accordingly, the mobile-phone-facilitated, real-time reporting also succeeds in attracting more media coverage on demonstration and protest activities, making these events increasingly eye catching and leaving governments fail to conceal these unflattering activities from the public in general.

Pressure accordingly bore down on the local government when photos and real-time video was uploaded to the internet or circulated among mobile users, traveling to larger audiences or groups. For one, unable to cover up these events, the government was forced to allow for coverage of previously censored issues, including demonstrations and popular protests. As an editor explained in the case of Xiamen’s anti-PX demonstration,

Once people, no matter whether they were participants or lookers-on, took and uploaded pictures or videos on demonstrations or mass incidents to the web, it

¹ Interview with a 35-year-old engineer, Xiamen, September 2010.

became impossible for the government to cover up these collective actions any more. Consequently, the government was forced to permit us [media] to cover these stories, either the PX project and its related arguments or the demonstration against it, in the hope of “occupying the high ground of public opinion” (占领舆论高地) [again]. Anyway, this move is relevant. Because it means that the government has to lift a ban on this issue.¹

To be more specific, once the government allows media coverage on a certain issue, it means that this issue is not a taboo any more. Accordingly, the media gain more freedom to report on this issue even though they have still been controlled to a remarkable degree by propaganda department. Moreover, people are allowed to discuss this issue in public communication. Therefore, journalists and editors in the case of Xiamen, for instance, were “delighted”² to watch those online “real-time reports” by citizen journalists, as this kind of exposure also generates an opportunity for the traditional media to break away from local authority’s stern control.

For another, the traditional media’s coverage has a more far-reaching implication, as the publishing of this kind of story in the party-controlled public sphere legitimizes the event (i.e., demonstration or protest) itself. When I interviewed a resident in Dalian about the anti-PX demonstration there in the middle of 2011, she said,

You know, the people in Xiamen used their mobile phones to organize a “stroll,” forcing the government to relocate the PX plant. Many media covered that story. Some praised this movement as “a victory of public opinion.” It means that they [the media] also advocate—do not deny, at least—using mobile phones to

¹ Interview with an editor in Xiamen local media, December 2010.

² Interview with an editor in Xiamen local media, December 2010.

facilitate demonstrations and articulate public opinion. We can do the same thing as what people in Xiamen did.¹

Here, the mobile phone-facilitated demonstration itself has been “legitimized” through the coverage of traditional media in the public sphere, thus creating a large influence and allowing more people to learn from it.

Considering that there had already been citizen journalism via mobile phones, and that the press from overseas media (such as *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, and the *Financial Times*) had already taken note of the issue, any crackdown to prevent the protest would probably have made the situation worse or perhaps even sparked a violent conflict. The longer such protests continue, the more politicized they will become. In this sense, the government has also been forced to take a more finely tuned approach to carrying out dialogue with people, which leads to more indirect empowerment of people.

Therefore, on the individual level, mobile technology makes information recording and dissemination accessible at any time, in any place, and in any situation. This feature encourages and turns more ordinary people into citizen journalists, in particular in the circumstance where the authorities do not allow the traditional media to cover certain events. Communication via mobile media thus has the potential to lead to a more open and freer public communication domain that is less constrained by officially sanctioned agendas, editorial policies in traditional media, or censorship and subtle but effective controls of the internet.

7.3.3 Peer-to-peer mobilization

¹ Online interview with a 22-year-old university student in Dalian, August 2011.

The technological feature of mobile communication on the micro (individual) level is just part of the reason why it is possible to initiate and encourage offline protests. The socio-cultural feature of peer-to-peer mobilization (see quadrant c in Table 7.1 on page 249) via mobile phones greatly encourages engagement and participation in protest activities.

We can see from these cases that besides the possibility of the free flow of information, mobile phones function in a sense like neighborhood salons that help aggregate individual preferences into a collective choice through a horizontal mobilization. As we mentioned in the previous chapter on mobile phone rumors, the mutual visibility in mobile communication greatly encourages mobile phone users to involve themselves in rumor spreading. Likewise, benefitting from the peer-to-peer networks of mobile communication, mobilization via mobile devices acts as a kind of “horizontal mobilization” rather than “vertical mobilization” (Nedelmann, 1987). This kind of mobilization thus incorporates internal processes of mobilization. In other words, for the mobile phone users in both cases, the mobilizing call is not being imported from “outsiders” of their mobile social network. Instead, the call is from “insiders” whom they already know. As several interviewees addressed, “...the mobilization is facilitated by us and for ourselves. It is our own business. Therefore, if we do not take part in [the movement] and care about ourselves, who will do so for us?”¹

In this way, this kind of “internal” mobilization via mobile communication not only increases the credibility of mobilizing messages and the further possibility of sharing these messages, but also cultivates the subject’s consciousness and a collective identity in protest mobilization.

¹ Interview with a 37-year-old engineer, Xiamen, December 2010.

Also, this process of peer-to-peer mobilization through mobile phones is more symmetrical and less hierarchical than traditional mobilizing groups such as political parties or NGOs. Put otherwise, there are no leading roles in the process of mobilization to advocate for engagement or participation. Rather, there are only your friends, relatives, colleagues, and so on—in short, the people you know and people like you. Consequently, acting as an extension of the range of interpersonal communication, mobilization via mobile phones is less like an order and more like an appeal, which largely increases the possibility of engagement and participation in protest movements.

7.3.4 Organizational effectiveness

On the macro (group) level, rapid organizational effectiveness (see quadrant d in Table 7.1 on page 249) via mobile phones is key to the success of protest movements, as it establishes a decentralized mobilizing structure, circumventing the possibility of stopping the proliferation of mobilizing messages while protecting organizers of protest activities from being located by government and its security agencies.

On the one hand, both cases show that, with the help of mobile phones, protesters are finding a quick organizational way around controls from internet police and spy software, or any other obstacle, despite warnings and censorships from local government and the public security bureau. In other words, when multiple mobile-phone users join the dissemination of mobilizing messages, it means that information sources also multiply. As one technician in a mobile company explained,

...the more people involved in the spread of what government calls “rumors,” the more impossible for government to stop the spread of these rumors. Because you

cannot prevent thousands of people from disseminating messages at the same time, unless you turn off the mobile network.¹

Consequently, it becomes more difficult for government to locate and eliminate the key source—for instance, what it calls “rumormonger”—and prevent the mobilizing message from getting out. In short, both the convenience of forwarding messages and the rapid diffusion of mobile communication establish a decentralized mobilizing structure, making it a difficult challenge to purge all of those mobilizing messages from the mobile network.

On the other hand, the high-speed decentralization of information dissemination via mobile phone also protects the organizers from being detained or jailed. In the mobile-phone-mediated popular protests, every person has an equal possibility to be an organizer once he/she forwards the information to one person or more. As a result, it has become difficult for the authorities to identify and capture the key organizer in the protest. In Xiamen’s anti-PX demonstration, for instance, each interviewee admitted that they had received the mobilizing message calling for a “stroll” multiple times. These SMS messages were in fact the same message that had been forwarded thousands of times within the mobile social network. As one interviewee said,

If they [government or public security agency] ask me where the original source of these messages is, I will tell them I have no idea about it. That is the fact. The people around me all get [this message]. Obviously, I think they [government and public security officials] also receive these messages. You cannot just simply say that people who forward this kind of message are the organizers of popular

¹ Interview with a 42-year-old technician in mobile phone company, Fuzhou, September 2010.

protests. [Likewise,] you cannot put every person that receives or forwards these messages into jail.¹

At this stage, the Chinese government and their citizens everywhere had been deluged with SMS protests demanding the relocation of the project and showing support for the Xiamen struggle. In other words, hundreds of thousands of mobile phone users were disseminating the SMS protests simultaneously. This kind of decentralized information dissemination structure brings great challenges to local authority for eliminating or tracing the source of these messages.

Likewise, in the case of Weng'an, a local journalist recalled that,

...suddenly you and people around you received this “rumor” [about the death of the girl] through your mobile phones from your relatives, friends, colleagues, family members, and so on. Nobody knew the original source. But each and every person knew that the people that sent you this message were not the initiator[s], but just forwarding the messages they received. This kind of situation makes it very hard for local government to find out the original source of these messages.²

As a result, each person who forwards the mobilizing information acts to potentially support the organization of a demonstration, which can hardly be controlled or traced back to the source of the information. The efficiency of the information dissemination within the decentralized architecture of mobile-network technology therefore helps to

¹ Interview with a 28-year-old white-collar employee in a PR company, Xiamen, December 2010.

² Online interview with a journalist at the provincial-level newspaper in Guizhou, October 2010.

protect the organizers of popular protests from being co-opted, bought off, detained, or jailed by the government.

7.3.5 Accumulation of experience

Also on the macro level (see quadrant e in Table 7.1 on page 249), the mobile phone bursts through communication constraints, connects the individual and his/her experience that was previously isolated, and further accumulates these experiences into a collective one. In other words, the message circulating via mobile communication is not just a kind of information itself, but also includes sharing and articulation the communicators' everyday experiences. Accordingly, the capacity to articulate and accumulate individual experience via mobile communication helps galvanize widespread distrust and anger over official corruption, irresponsibility, inaction, and suppression of the people.

In the case of Weng'an, for instance, the message via mobile phones about the cover-up of the girl's unusual death struck a chord, making other residents recall their bitter experiences under local authority's iron rule. As one interviewee said,

...when we got this event [the cover-up of Li's death and the later neglect of demands from Li's family's] [from our mobile phones], it just reminded me and my friends of our own harsh experiences. In particular, this event lets us know that both we and Li's family share a mutual connection because both have been treated poorly by the government. We forwarded this message [via our mobile phones] to let more people know about this event. People then will know that

they are not the only ones who suffered from the unfair treatments by the government. We are all in the same boat and we share the same experience.¹

From the above statement we see that people indicated and shared their attitudes towards local authority by disseminating Li's story through their mobile devices. The spreading of this kind of message thus resonated, connecting individual's experience with others and accumulating them into a collective one. More specifically, when people communicated with each other and forwarded this story, they implicitly tell those to whom they have sent messages that "this is not just other people's stories or experiences; I also have similar experiences, or I agree that this kind of unjust event is in fact a very common phenomenon here. Thus I need you to become aware of it and think about your experience as well." In turn, once people get more of the same or similar messages via their mobile phones, they get more affirmations from the people in their mobile social network that their experiences have been shared and have resonated with more people. In this way, the more people there are involved in mobile communication, the more experience people share, the more emotional support people get, and the bigger the collective experience becomes. In this way, mobile devices help facilitate communication in order to share, articulate, and accumulate people's experiences. It also shows that the right to communication is as important as the right to the free flow of information, because public experience accumulated and further articulated in mobile-phone-mediated popular protests is moreover not merely a virtual venting but a profoundly positive involvement in public affairs.

Whether the movements in Xiamen or Weng'an subside or flare up again remains to be seen¹, but the mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests themselves are of

¹ Online interviews with Weng'an residents, October 2010.

enormous significance for all those fighting against environmental destruction or for social justice, and for the rights to freedom of expression and communication, political participation and civic engagement in contemporary China. These protests from the communication have-nots—whether they are the urban middle class or the rural peasants—being deprived of means of expression, interaction, discussion, and communication in public communication marked not only the emergence of groundbreaking protest movements. More importantly, these protests demonstrate a significant increase in the public recognition of the mobile phone as a legitimate resource and weapon with a strong capacity to connect with each other, to disseminate information, to mobilize collective actions, to facilitate communication outside the official public sphere, and even to influence and change the dominant public sphere. It has had a far-reaching impact on Chinese politics and society as these events are still being quoted, learnt from, talked about, and felt by people as the rare victory of public opinion over local bureaucrats for whom economic development normally is the top priority (Xiamen), or as a counterattack to the official malfeasance, practices of favoritism, and inaction (Weng'an). Grassroots mobile-phone mobilization in particular brings more chances for the peasant group's expression of interest to take the lead over the central government. Transforming digital activism, and thus reducing biases in an uneven political playing field, political insurgents, who are normally disadvantaged in communicative resources and access to the main media, thus are in a position to compete more effectively. More importantly, these events, relying on mobile-phone-empowered public participation, established a new type of

¹ In fact, learning from the Xiamen case, citizens have already replicated this model of mobile-phone-facilitated mobilization and public participation by using their mobile devices to organize demonstrations or protests in other cities to protest against the government's decisions, such as the "200-people's group walk" in Chengdu (Huang, 2008), the anti-magnetic-levitated-train rail protests in Shanghai (Kurtenbach, 2008) in 2008, and the anti-PX demonstration in Dalian in 2011 (YouTube, 2011).

activism with an emerging mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere, which creates a new power dynamics in the struggles against the party's dictatorship and its hegemonic discourse in the public sphere.

7.4 OFFLINE POPULAR PROTESTS AND A MOBILE-PHONE-FACILITATED COUNTER-PUBLIC SPHERE IN CHINA

Given our discussion of the role and functions of the mobile phone in offline popular protests, we observe that the communicative practices enabled and empowered by mobile devices emerge as a resource for people of all social strata to move against the authorities, including its tightening of information control policies, its ever harsher communication suppression under the pretext of various government-imposed charges (e.g., rumor), and its severe monopoly and manipulation of the media in order to legitimize its authoritarian rule. More importantly, with the help of mobile devices, these mobile-phone-facilitated communicative practices build up a counter-public sphere, which not only (a) demonstrates people's struggle for the right to communication and (b) articulates a general social horizon of experience from the suppressed groups, but also (c) generates a new power dynamic for the grassroots to move against, challenge, or even change the dominant public sphere, mass media practice, and governmental practices.

7.4.1 The mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere as a means of struggling for the right to communication

The emergence of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere demonstrates Chinese people's increasing awareness of the importance of the right to

communication—including the right to know and the right to freedom of expression—and their struggle for the right to communication with the help of their mundane communication tools.

On the one hand, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere has been generated effectively against the censorship from government. More specifically, the information that people *perceive* as what government attempts to hide or censor is normally easier to proliferate through mobile phones as unofficial communication channels outside the official propaganda machine. In this way, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere plays the role as the opponent to the official public sphere: what the party tries to address or advocate never becomes popular in mobile communication, let alone being an agenda, unless people use it to satirize and inveigh against the authorities. For instance, instead of saying something has been censored, people prefer the expression that “it has been harmonized” (被和谐了). Here, “harmony,” the idea that the party advocates, has become trademark sarcasm toward stern censorship. By contrast, what the party tries to cover up—or what people perceive to be hidden—is widely spread via new media platforms; among them, the mobile phone is a key platform for ordinary citizens. In particular, the silence or denial from the party-controlled media only achieves the opposite effect: encouraging the proliferation of those official “unfavorable” pieces of information within the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere in a short time. This mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere thus reveals both the strong distrust among the public at large toward the party and its propaganda machines, and the public’s rebellion against the blockage of their rights to know by the authorities. In this way, people employ their mobile phones to generate a counter-public sphere against the official

discourse in the dominant public sphere, no matter its attempts to keep silent, suppress, deny, or deride certain information.

On the other hand, the mobile phone becomes a tool for ordinary citizens to struggle for their right to the freedom of expression, interaction, and discussion and for a (relatively) autonomous communication network outside the official mass media and the public sphere. Notably, in both cases in rural and urban China, we observe that information—even the truth—is to some degree *not important any more*. More specifically, not everyone in Xiamen disseminating the warning or mobilizing text message concerning the PX project fully believed that this project would have a devastating impact on the local environment¹. Likewise, not everyone in Weng'an spreading what government called “rumor” believed that Wang Jiao and the two young men with family connections to local authorities raped and killed Li Shufen. Nevertheless, these unsettling factors did not stop the residents in either city from picking up their mobile phones and forwarding these messages. Here, just as we see in the proliferation of mobile phone rumors, people do not just want information or the truth. They want to communicate with each other; they want an autonomous communication sphere beyond government's interferences and controls. As a result, people, as what this study names “the communication have-nots,” are struggling to guarantee their right to communication as well as generating and consolidating the mobile-phone-facilitated communicative sphere as both an autonomous communication sphere for expression, interaction, and discussion among themselves and an autonomous communication network for themselves. These kinds of activities accordingly demonstrate an unprecedented rebellion toward government's suppression and control over public communication. In particular, they demonstrate

¹ See the discussion on mobile phone rumor as a kind of struggle against communication control in the previous chapter.

that people are turning their mobile devices—a private media—into a public and political tool against the authorities’ communication suppression and deprivation. In other words, by virtue of their mobile phones, the communication have-nots create a relatively autonomous communication sphere outside of and against party-monopolized public communication. Also through mobile phones, the communication have-nots attempt to consolidate this mobile-phone–facilitated counter-public sphere as the one in which they would enjoy the rights to freedom of expression, interaction, and discussion. In all, the mobile phone becomes a resource for the communication have-nots to get rid of their negative identities and disadvantage, and further generates an autonomous communicative sphere.

To summarize, through engaging in mobile communication voluntarily and actively, people, in particular those communication have-nots, are fighting for the establishment and consolidation of an autonomous communication sphere for themselves and an autonomous communication network that belongs only to themselves, both of which are largely outside the official public sphere or the government-controlled mass communication. This kind of mobile-phone–facilitated counter-public sphere helps not only ensure the right to know, but also enhances certain basic human rights, such as the freedom of expression, interaction, and discussion—in short, the people’s right to communication—and strengthens the capability of civic engagement and political participation of ordinary people.

7.4.2 The mobile-phone–facilitated counter-public sphere as a sphere in which to articulate social experiences

The power of the mobile-phone–facilitated counter-public sphere lies not just in its capability to generate a communicative sphere outside and against the dominant

public sphere. There is something in the nature of Chinese society and mobile communication that makes this counter-public sphere function as a means to articulate social experiences, in particular those from the communication have-nots—the counter-public in the context of China.

As we demonstrated from the analysis of cases, people are making use of their mobile devices not just for struggling against the party's monopoly in public communication; more importantly, the mobile phone plays a relevant role of accumulating and articulating people's everyday experience, which accordingly generates a different sphere of communicative action from the official public sphere in contemporary China. More specifically, on the one hand, mediated by the mobile phone, this communicative sphere is developed around personal relations—*guanxi*—in the context of China. Accordingly, this counter-public sphere gives more weight to reliability and credibility based on *guanxi* than on abstract principles of sender-receiver in mass communication. In our cases, for instance, spread via mobile phone as a personal approach with proximity and higher credibility, directives and rumors from mobile media helped mobilize a key social resource— people within a social network—and draw thousands of people together for a public demonstration or mass incident, creating a cascading effect that inflamed public anger, passions, or resistance and made waves in China's society. Therefore, this mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere is based upon experiences in people's daily interpersonal communication, which accordingly integrates individual elements into a coherent whole.

More importantly, the influence and experience of people's everyday interpersonal communication lends the mobile-phone-facilitated communicative sphere a coherence that threatens to overwhelm other, less-organized government agencies and their

affiliations. For instance, in the anti-PX demonstration case, informed by their own mobile social network, local journalists, the police, and soldiers were unwilling to be involved in either local government's propaganda campaigns or its suppression activities toward the demonstrators. In this way, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere encourages and ensures the formulation of association and assembly with a tight and more intimate bond within the public, which contributes to more consolidated resistance and protest activities.

On the other hand, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere accumulates and articulates a collective experience of suppression, exclusion, and exploitation under the dictatorship of the party. As we have already discussed, mobile communication helps ordinary people connect and share their individual experiences with each other. The more people engage in the mobile-phone-facilitated communicative sphere, the more suppressed experiences are shared, confirmed, and articulated, and the more people understand that they are not the only one that suffered from the bullying, dispossession, and injuries caused by the authorities. In this way, mobile-phone-facilitated political participation is not generated by institutions but is based on personal experience and motivation and articulated via mobile devices; the articulation of experience accordingly achieves the formation of tight-knit groups based on their common experience with the party's dictatorship.

7.4.3 The mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere as a power dynamic and influence against the dominant public sphere

Through the popularity of mobile media and the creative use of mobile devices as a resource against the authorities, Chinese people have succeeded in creating a mobile-

phone-facilitated counter-public sphere as an emerging power dynamic and influence against the dominant public sphere.

More specifically, as communication technology—led primarily by the spread of the mobile phone—seeps deeper into Chinese society, it is now much more possible for the individual to become an active political participant in real life. Unpredictable and unregulated mobile communication enables citizens to breach censorship, receive information from the outside world, coordinate a wide range of activities including large-scale protests, and make bottom-up, people-based political waves in an aggressive struggle for democratic expression and political participation. Acting as an extension of the range of individual communication, public participation and civic engagement in the decision-making process that is facilitated via mobile phones has effectively widened the channels for expressing public grievances, influencing the government (whether local or central), mobilizing public rebellion when initiating political participation, and breaking government's dictatorship while influencing the dominant public sphere. With low-cost mobile phones gaining popularity, moreover, there are now new, competing models of citizen journalism with more outlets delivering news. In this way, the mobile phone as an independent citizen platform for disseminating unofficial, or even anti-official information integrates itself as part of this mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere. In this way, as we have already seen in the cases of this chapter, mobile communication generates a specific kind of counter-public sphere that can enhance, in Barber's thoughts, "direct" political participation and citizen-powered decision-making processes (Barber, 1984: 538). Moreover, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere in general, and the growth of citizen journalism in particular, have a far-reaching impact on the government-controlled public sphere in connection with its roles, institutions, and

bureaucracies in the information age. In other words, this counter-public sphere has not only the dynamics to go against the dominant public sphere, but also the potential to influence and change, no matter how slight, the government-controlled media's practice and the dominant public sphere. This kind of change, in turn, legitimizes the role and power of the mobile phone and its counter-public sphere, which further encourages more people to learn from the cases and employ their mobile phones as a resource against the authorities. In practice, details vary from incident to incident, but they share a common foundation of mobile media—and the counter-public sphere these mobile devices help generate—as non-mainstream, grassroots efforts to serve the social, cultural, political, and communicative needs of the communication have-nots, who have been excluded or marginalized in the mass-media public sphere. Consequently, although largely based on low-cost mobile devices and inexpensive communication fees, with just a few finger clicks this mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere has an energizing force, nurturing a power dynamic against the party's dictatorship and influencing the dominant public sphere.

7.5 CONCLUSION

Based on the cases of offline popular protests facilitated and empowered by the mobile phone in rural and urban areas, this chapter highlights a growing offline problem for China's government in a country with the world's largest and fastest-growing population of mobile phone users. More specifically, we investigated how mobile phones in both rural and urban areas help initiate, mobilize, and disseminate struggles for the free flow of information and expression (Xiamen), and social justice and the rule of law (Weng'an), building an *inexpensive* counter-public sphere that

invents and circulates discourses opposing those featured in the mainstream, making the predominant public sphere more inclusive and open to ordinary people. The mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere represents an emerging, serious, and effective form of counter force against the party's dictatorship and its hegemonic discourse in the dominant public sphere. In addition, the dynamic of this counter-public sphere lies both in the incorporation of more interpersonal, horizontal communication and in the articulation of social experience. Therefore the role of this mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere 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 to the government, and forcing the authorities to engage with new kinds of practices. As the power of mobilization, civic engagement, and political participation spreads through multi-function mobile media and networks that can never be entirely blocked, mobile communication indeed sheds light on and motivates further inquiry into whether the mobile-phone-mediated counter-public sphere could possibly influence the trajectory of China's future democratic development—which goes to the conclusion part of this dissertation.

8. CONCLUSION

In this conclusion, I elaborate on three things. First, I summarize the findings from this study about the role of mobile media as “weapons of the weak” in the Chinese people’s struggles for freedom of expression, the right to communication, and a relatively autonomous civil communicative sphere. Second, I elucidate the relationship between the dominant public sphere and this emerging mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere as well as its implications for democratic expression and political participation—in short, the process of democratization—in the context of China. Third, I provide some suggestions for further research on media and democracy in China in particular, and mobile media, digital democracy, and the counter-public sphere in general.

8.1 THE MOBILE PHONE AS “THE WEAPONS OF THE WEAK”

The emerging role of mobile phones in contentious politics around the world has generated a rich, diverse scholarship on mobile media and contentious activities. Even so, very few studies address the role of the mobile phone in contemporary China, leaving this field almost blank. As one of the first studies in this field, my research demonstrates that ubiquitous mobile communication exerts a growing influence on Chinese politics and society, with the increasing use of mobile devices as a resource for disseminating censored information, forming and articulating collective experience, facilitating mobile phone rumor as a new kind of nonviolent public resistance, mobilizing and coordinating offline demonstrations, and even sparking

mass incidents against the authorities. In the following sections, I discuss the role of the mobile phone as “the weapon of the weak” and its special impact on contentious activities in the Chinese context from three perspectives: first, the mobile phone as a mundane communication tool; second, mobile communication in *guanxi*-embedded Chinese society; third, the mobile device as a multi-media platform. By looking at the role of mobile phones in politics in the specific socio-political context of China, this research has generated new insights above and beyond from those arising from research on internet-based activism.

8.1.1 The mobile phone as a mundane communication tool

Along with the rapid diffusion of mobile devices, the mobile phone has become a simple yet substantial device for mundane communication in everyday life (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Castells, Fernandez - Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007). The penetration of mobile phones into daily life due to its availability and cost-effectiveness has not only lowered the threshold for organizing collective actions, but also brought challenges to government censorship and control over society.

To be more specific, the low-cost and user-friendly mobile phone provides Chinese people, especially those without complicated communication skills (e.g., tweeting, online chatting, or “*fanqiang*” [circumventing censorship]) a convenient means of airing *unrecognized* personal grievances, sharing *suppressed* individual experiences, accumulating *non-permitted* collective power, mobilizing “*illegal*”—as perceived by the government—collective actions, and coordinating *prohibited* contentious movements. Importantly, if we observe the uses of mobile phones in most of the cases examined here, we find that they are largely the basic and normal functions of a mobile phone: voice, SMS, or, at most, MMS functions. In other words, these

instances of public resistance and popular protests have been generated, facilitated, and empowered through the very basic functions of the mobile phone in mundane communication—calling and texting—rather than more complex ones. Thus, because of the control over and constraints on public communication from the party-state, people have been forced to adapt whatever kind of communicative tools they have access to, and even those for (inter-)personal communication—the mobile phone as the most popular and convenient-for-operation option in particular—to facilitate an autonomous communication sphere. Importantly, however, this sphere is arguably beyond and against the party-dominant public sphere. This point has been made by Castells: “[A]s people have appropriated new forms of communication, they have built their own systems of mass communication, via SMS, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, wikis, and the like” (Castells, 2009: 65). As such, the mobile phone allows Chinese citizens, even those without abundant finances or technical competency (e.g., to use the internet), to express their discontent, pass on their anger, and mount individual and collective resistance to the party’s authority, through a simple and fast method—twiddling their thumbs over a mobile phone’s keyboard during their everyday lives. Therefore, the role of the mobile phone as a mundane communication tool enables and empowers Chinese people, particularly those who are not technologically savvy, not only to *express* their voices and make them *heard*, but also to initiate collective actions and sometimes set off demonstrations and protests.

More important, as mobile phone use penetrates both people’s everyday lives and government’s propaganda campaigns, the conventional control method becomes, to a certain extent, ineffective. One of the most effective (and simple) ways of controlling new media (e.g., the internet) is to cut off network services. However, the authorities find it increasingly difficult to simply cut off mobile telecommunication services to

stop, for instance, the proliferation of rumors or mobilization messages. Because, first, government officials find themselves reliant on mobile services to stay in contact with each other and carry out daily work, just like ordinary citizens, if not more so. Second, government integrates mobile services as part of its propaganda system. Against this backdrop, to cut off mobile services arbitrarily would not only be a self-defeating option that would impede the normal functioning of authorities but would also have a political price for disabling part of their propaganda machines. Third, if the government cuts off mobile telecommunication services, it would have a much wider impact than only on those citizens who are politically active. In this way, even those who previously did not pay attention to or care about politically sensitive topics are made aware of government fears so much that it is even willing to sacrifice the interest of the public at large only to benefit its political interests through blocking a few government-labeled “disharmonious” sounds. If this situation happens, larger-scale discontent with the government would no doubt emerge, weakening the legitimacy of the party’s rule and power in the long run. To avoid this kind of situation or the impact it would have, the authorities have been forced to minimize collateral damage when they attempt to censor or control mundane communication tools. Therefore, the mobile phone as a mundane communication tool embodies flexibility and adaptability for *ordinary people* to breach the constraints of censorship, contravene government’s control, and initiate and coordinate protests and resistance movements in the context of China.

8.1.2 Mobile communication in *guanxi*-embedded Chinese society

In his reflection on studies of Chinese internet culture and politics, Yang (2011) criticizes issues of “technology without people” and “internet without culture,” which

incorporate a deterministic view of technology and lack enough socio-cultural attention, respectively. Likewise, as I argue in this study, current studies on mobile communication in China fail to pay enough attention to how *guanxi*, a key cultural characteristic that is embedded in almost every part of social life in Chinese society, shapes both mobile communication and the messages disseminated through it. Accordingly, I suggest a culture-based approach to understanding the characteristics of mobile communication linkages among individuals and the mobile social network. As I see it, the socio-cultural characteristics of mobile communication not only differentiate Chinese mobile social networks from other ones, but also greatly influence information dissemination and communicative practice within this network.

Under this assumption, how does *guanxi* influence mobile communication, and how does it impact resistance and protest movements? As this study indicates, the dynamics of *guanxi* have been embedded into both mobile communication and mobile social networks in the wake of the increasing popularity of mobile devices and the huge rise in mobile phone use in developing and maintaining social relations in contemporary China. More specifically, mobile communication enables faster sharing and shaping of messages, experience, and ideas, particularly suppressed and censored ones. With trust strengthened through *guanxi* and personal social networks, information (even rumor messages) enjoys higher credibility, which makes mobile phone users even more likely to trust and disseminate these messages. Against this backdrop, low-cost, convenient, and highly efficient mobile communication contributes to *the quasi-mass communication* of censored or mobilizing messages within social networks within a short time, making it possible for this kind of message to reach as many people as possible, as soon as possible. The rapid dissemination of censored or mobilizing messages thus accumulates social experiences and underpins

collective actions in the context of China. In the meantime, at an emotional level, *guanxi*-based mobile communication creates a sense of feeling safe in a group, of membership in a group, and of being understood and supported by the social network. These feelings invite and encourage engagement and participation in both online public resistance and offline popular protests. In this way, the specific structure of *guanxi*-embedded mobile communication largely shapes collective actions, creating a unique mechanism of mobilizing social networks and organizing contentious activities. The dynamics and strength of mobile phones in grassroots collective mobilization therefore emanate not only from the mobile technology itself, but also from the socio-cultural source—*guanxi*—which is deeply rooted in Chinese society.

8.1.3 Mobile devices as multiple-media platforms

Mobile phones as multiple-media platforms also provide an enriched and flexible way of creating and disseminating unofficial and anti-authority messages. The most common and convenient means include voice calls, group texting, and picture messaging. The growing popularity of the mobile internet also conveniently facilitates communication and information-sharing online. These technological features empower ordinary citizens, offering each and every mobile phone user the basic resources to be a citizen journalist. This further generates a new form of “mediated visibility” (Thompson, 2005) in Chinese society. Frequently, startling images or video captured by civilians with the camera on their mobile phones on the scene of, for instance, forced demolition or popular protests, have been uploaded and viewed by the people of China and the world via *Weibo*, Chinese microblogging websites, YouTube, and even mainstream media. Both the ease of creating content and the ease of sharing it with local and global audiences through mobile media leave the

traditional mass media no longer the sole gatekeeper over what the public knows. With the help of mobile devices, live reporting by ordinary citizens with on-the-spot coverage enables quick responses to the event, actively engages citizens in spreading information about politically sensitive topics, expresses different versions and opinions of the event and even criticizes the government, and forces authorities to tweak both their hard-fisted responses to challenges from below and their harsh controls over public communication, in particular mass media. In this way, mobile devices as multi-media platforms generate new possibilities for challenging the party's hegemonic discourse in the public sphere, influencing the government-controlled media, and promoting transparency in Chinese society.

In short, the role of the mobile phone as a communications tool is especially meaningful in China where citizens previously had little and sometimes even no opportunity for unconstrained expression and communication. Furthermore, this newfound communication power has developed despite stringent government efforts to control the mobile medium. Although the mobile phone is not a unique "weapon" in the struggle for popular resistance, protests, and even democratization, its strength lies in its ability to penetrate every corner and moment of the lives of the vast, overwhelming majority of Chinese people. Unlike other ICTs platforms (e.g., the internet or social networking), the achievements of mobile media are not largely the result of a "liberation technology" (Meier, 2011). This does not necessarily mean that technology is not the answer. Rather, just as Stengel highlights:

Technology mattered, but this was not a technological revolution. Social networks did not cause these movements, but they kept them alive and connected. Technology allowed us to watch, and it spread the virus of protest,

but this was not a wired revolution; it was a human one, of hearts and minds, the oldest technology of all.

(Stengel, 2011: 53)

In the case of China, the mobile phone lowers the threshold for adopting and appropriating technology to struggle against the authorities, accordingly shaping itself as a specific kind of “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985), on the one hand; and it allows Chinese people to fully harness their creativity and ingenuity in the use of it, through such methods as the rhetorical functions of text (e.g., *sanbu* [stroll] and *gouwu* [shopping]) and the mobilization functions of social network resources, on the other hand. The future of mobile-politics in China therefore requires vision and awareness of political and civil society leaders. While changing the complete political situation of a country in a short span of time is very near impossible, politicians and activists—especially those from the younger generation—are likely to make better use of mobile media in their campaigns and struggles. Those who have the courage and imagination to innovate, as the unprecedented anti-PX demonstration and the Weng’an mass incident show, are the most likely to be the superiors or even winners in both the virtual and real worlds.

8.2 THE MOBILE-PHONE–FACILITATED COUNTER-PUBLIC SPHERE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Given the role and function of the mobile phone in popular protest and resistance, we observe an emerging mobile-phone–facilitated counter-public sphere in contemporary

China against the backdrop of the increasing use of mobile devices as a means to break through the government’s censorship firewall, to accumulate individual experience, to mobilize both online and offline public resistance and popular protest, to broadcast news beyond official versions of events, and to generate a civic communication sphere outside and against the party-dominant public sphere. Based on the radial (Figure 8.1) given below, I elaborate on the characteristics of the mobile-phone–facilitated counter-public sphere in contemporary China. The radial distinguishes between macro- and micro-level features of the mobile-phone–facilitated counter-public sphere. Importantly, these characteristics revolve around the articulation of experience as the key element of the mobile-phone–facilitated counter-public sphere.

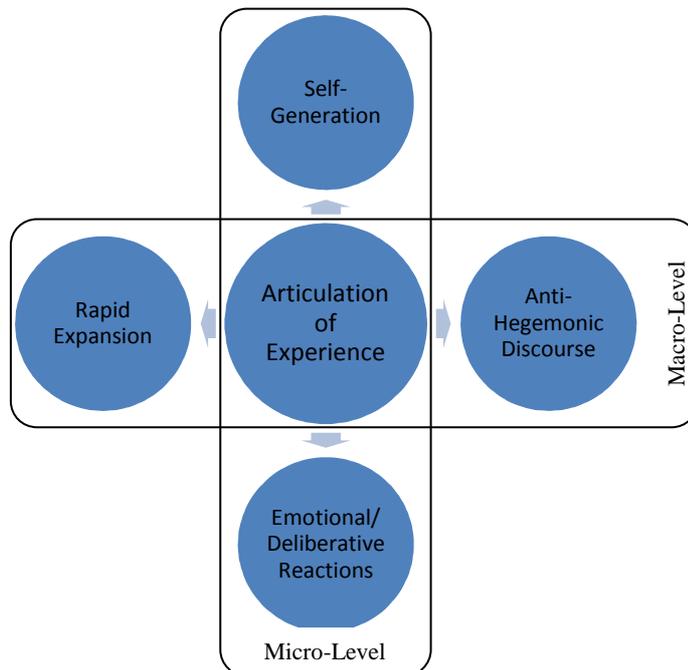


Figure 8.1 The characteristics of the mobile-phone–facilitated counter-public sphere in China

(1) At the radial center, *articulation of experience* is the core and central driver of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere. More specifically, whether circulating the rumor via mobile devices as a form of online public resistance, disseminating the mobilizing calls and text messages to coordinate offline protest movements, or spreading on-the-spot news of demonstrations or protests through mobile phones or mobile internet against the silence of government and official media or governmentese, these activities articulate and highlight the social experience of the public at large in contemporary China. In other words, Chinese citizens appropriate their mobile phones as a key and convenient resource to communicate with each other and express their everyday experience—in particular those unrecognized, suppressed, and marginalized ones—accumulating experiences that were once isolated, scattered, or unrelated and making them more visible and palpable. As such, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere satisfies the communicative needs of those people who wish to express their own experiences but find that their voices are muffled, embodies and underlies “the social horizon of experience” (Negt & Kluge, 1993: x) beyond the party-controlled mass media and the mass-mediated public sphere, and generates an alternative and, to a degree, autonomous communicative sphere for what this study names “the communication have-nots” to not just articulate but also highlight the relevance of their experiences to the whole society.

Moreover, as the radial demonstrates, shaped by mobile media, the articulation of experience enjoys the following four characteristics:

1. On the micro level, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere is a form of self-generated power dynamics by ordinary people through horizontal communication with the help of their mobile devices. In other words, the forming of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere is a process of

self-generation—as shown on the top of the radial—and self-organization by the communication have-nots. Making use of their mobile devices, those who have limited access to, or have even been deprived of, means of expression, interaction, and communication spontaneously generate a mobile-phone-mediated communicative sphere through communicating with each other. This process is largely based on an individual’s internal communication motivation and his or her raising awareness of the right to communication, rather than being driven by any external force. Consequently, both this process and the resulting communicative sphere it generates contribute to Chinese people’s consciousness-raising of the right to communication. Therefore, in the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere the construction of the Chinese individual as a political subject struggling for the right to communication can be viewed as a largely spontaneous process.

2. The forming and functioning of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere relies on not just *deliberative reactions*, but also *emotional ones*—as the bottom of the radial shows—in particular feelings of anger, grievance, bitterness, and injustice from the communication have-nots. As we already mentioned in the theoretical chapter, critics argued against the rationalism in Habermas’s idea concerning the public sphere as it “underestimates the undoubted power of non-rationalistic elements of political and national culture that confers a wider, non-deliberative sense of solidarity and belonging” (Schlesinger, 1997: 387; also see Zhao [2007]). As this study demonstrates, under the influence of experiences—including both the suppressed or marginalized experiences and social communication experiences in everyday life—the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere incorporates emotion

as one of its most significant sources of power to accumulate the individual element to become a more coherent unit and struggle against the dominant public sphere. In this way, as this study demonstrates, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere would be both emotional and deliberative (e.g., the anti-PX demonstration in Xiamen). But it can also be emotionally loaded (e.g., the mobile-phone-mobilized mass incident in Weng'an). In short, the connection, accumulation, and articulation of emotion via mobile communication generate a unique bonding experience, solidifying support in the counter-public sphere for the communication have-nots themselves.

3. Benefitting from the technological features of mobile communication (low cost of telecommunication, instantaneous synchronous communication, easier asynchronous communication) and the everyday experience of communication constraint, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere enjoys *rapid expansion*, as the right side, macro level of the radial shows. On the one hand, the mobile phone enables the distribution and proliferation of messages within a short time in a convenient way: the only thing you need to do is twiddle the keyboard to make a call or disseminate messages. The rapid diffusion of mobile messages, whether they are the rumor or mobilizing information, contributes to the fast emergence, expansion, and consolidation of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere. On the other hand, the articulation of experience also encourages mobile phone users to involve themselves in the forming of this counter-public sphere. As more and more people engage in materializing this counter-public sphere through their mobile devices, mobile communication facilitates a fast-growing communicative sphere that would have an impact the same as, or even larger than, the mass-media-mediated one.

As such, the mechanism of rapid expansion contributes to the potential capability of the quasi-mass-communication effect of mobile communication, enabling the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere to argue against and challenge the party-controlled, mass-media-based discourse in the dominant public sphere.

4. The mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere generates and empowers an *anti-hegemonic discourse*—against the party’s dictatorship in the public sphere, as the right side, macro level of the radial shows. Specifically, the key role and function of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere is to help the communication have-nots speak their stories, voice their ideas, or express their emotions as alternative discourses against the hegemonic one in the party-dominated public sphere. This kind of discourse, largely based on the articulation of everyday experiences of marginalization and suppression, paints a somewhat different picture of Chinese society than the official varnish—what the party declares the “harmonious society” in particular—and offers an alternative understanding that is close to the actual experience of Chinese people in their everyday lives.

In short, the frequent appropriation of mobile phones as a tool and resource of resistance and protests results in a rapid rise in the influence of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere and consequently forms an active political dynamic against the party’s monopolized discourse in the dominant public sphere. Importantly, the emergence of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere signals not only its existence alongside the dominant public sphere, but also its resilience in the face of being excluded or marginalized from it. Moreover, this counter-public sphere in Chinese society counteracts its exclusion or marginalization not only by trying to

articulate people's experiences and (re)inject new topics of democratic expression and communication into the agenda, but also by facilitating new forms of public participation and civic engagement beyond the discussions of topics already on the agenda and the norms on which cyber exclusion is based. Consequently, the process of "domesticating" (Berker, Hartmann, & Punie, 2006) mobile media in the struggle against the dominant public sphere reflects what Castells points out: "the relevance of a given technology, and its acceptance by people at large, do not result from the technology itself, but from appropriation of the technology by individuals and collectives to fit their needs and their culture" (Castells, 2009: 362). In the case of China, as we have already seen, the high-pressure suppression and control over communication by the party and its affiliated agencies forces Chinese people to convert their mobile phones into a tool of resistance and protest during and beyond their everyday communication. This kind of employment and appropriation further activates and generates resistance forces by the aid of the dynamics of the social network in the context of China. Therefore, it is through mobile media that social experience has been articulated and becomes relevant in contemporary Chinese society—during this process, a mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere has been facilitated and consolidated through a large increase in mobile phone use in the interest of the public at large, in particular those marginalized and suppressed individuals and groups in the public sphere, further forming an emerging power dynamic against the party's dictatorship and suppression.

Against this backdrop, as shown in the following figure (Figure 8.2), the relationship between the dominant public sphere and the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere and its impact and implication can be understood as follows:

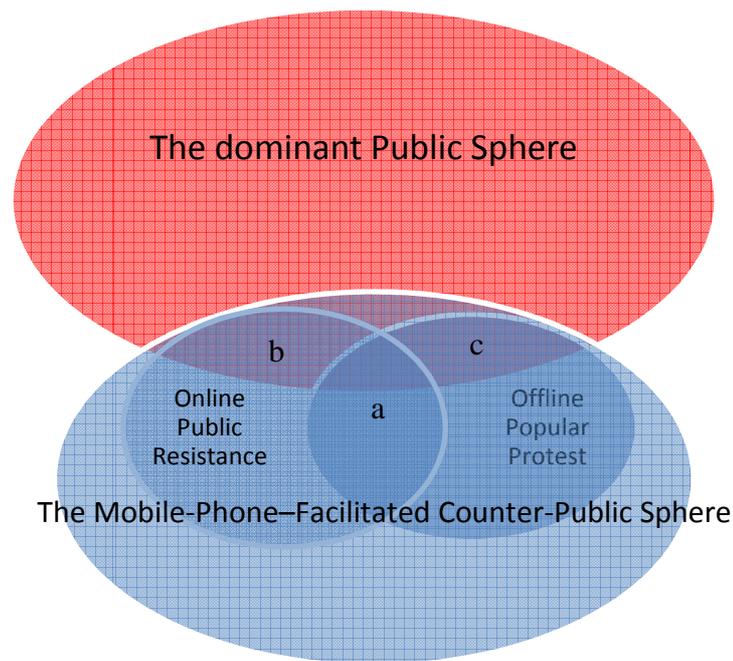


Figure 8.2 The relationship between the public sphere and the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere in contemporary China

First, the size of either the dominant public sphere or the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere, or the part of online public resistance or offline popular protest, does not represent their influences in practice. To be more specific, as shown in Figure 8.2, it does not mean that the dominant public sphere and the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere have almost equal influence over society. Rather, Figure 8.2 shows that these two spheres are taking an opposing position to each other. Likewise, the two small ovals—online public resistance and offline popular protest—inside the bigger one named “the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere” refer to two different aspects of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere.

Second, the two aspects of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere—online public resistance and offline popular protest—can be converted to each other (a). More specifically, an online public resistance (e.g., rumor) is able to spark an offline demonstration or popular protest, while an offline demonstration or popular

protest normally includes an online public resistance (e.g., breaking through censorship via mobile communication). In addition, even being suppressed in the real world, an offline demonstration or popular protest can still transfer itself to an online public resistance, continuing and broadening its impact.

Third, besides the antagonistic relationship toward the dominant public sphere, both the online public resistance (b) and the offline popular protest (c), as part of the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere, have the potential to influence and even change the dominant public sphere. This potential partly comes from the fact that the party's dictatorship—in particular its monopoly over public communication—causes growing discontent among the Chinese people. From a micro perspective, for those involved in contentious events, no matter who you are or what kind of social strata you belong to, you will end up repeating the same suffering: being deprived of means of expression, interaction, and communication and further jeopardized by the party-state. Informed by mobile media, citizens of all types, even civil servants and police (as the case of the anti-PX demonstration in Xiamen shows; see the previous chapter), are more likely to form a united front and engage themselves in contentious events against the authorities. This feature is essential in negating the government's "iron hand" toward its population, deconstructing to a degree the hegemonic discourse in the public sphere. From a macro perspective, particularly under the influence of mobile-phone-facilitated citizen journalists, whose communicative practices succeeded in breaking the authorities' censorship, people increasingly realize that no one is "safe" under the rule of the party. In other words, the communication have-nots could be anyone. Accordingly, more and more people involve themselves in driving real social changes against the rule of the party and its control over public communication. In particular in recent years, we saw that more and more people from

different social backgrounds increasingly called for political reforms, journalists and editors became bolder and more skillful in their coverage of politically sensitive topics, and more importantly citizens displayed great initiative in using their mobile devices in resistance and protest. Although the resulting influences or changes are yet to be seen and hard to predict, they still encourage further adjustment and transformation in the dominant public sphere, such as the government-controlled traditional media.

Here, more importantly, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere offers a new means of public engagement and political participation, which further contributes to the advancement of democratization in the specific context of China. As we already discussed in the theoretical chapter, either the media or the idea of democracy should be recognized and defined in terms of different cultural codes and in terms of the implicit social and political values in different countries. Accordingly, we have to base our discussion on the possibility of democratization under the influence of mobile phones on people's perception of democracy in contemporary China. As several studies demonstrate, Chinese people have a totally different understanding than the West of the definitions and implementation of democracy (Nathan, 1986; Shi, 1997; Naisbitt & Naisbitt, 2010). In particular, based on the survey he conducted in China regarding Chinese people's perception of democracy, Shi (2010) differentiates two separate definitions of democracy between the West and Asia: procedural democracy and substantive democracy. As Shi argues, the former, which corresponds to Western democracy (Dahl, 1989; Schumpeter, 2010),

...determines the legitimacy of state governments based on democratic procedures such as election, lobbying, etc., while the latter believes definition of

democracy mainly based on how well policies from the governments reflect interests of the public.

(Pei & Shi, 2007)

According to Shi (2010), people in Asia in general, and in China in particular, associate themselves more with substantive democracy. Accordingly, making the government listen, whether through nonviolent resistance, popular protest, or even mass incident, to the “voice” of people is a minimal, basic, but *key* condition to ensure substantive democracy, as it is impossible for the government to take your interests into account—in particular in a country with stern controls of expression and communication—unless it hears your appeal. Against this backdrop, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere provides an alternative approach to political participation beyond the people’s congress, the existing political system of representative democracy through which, by principle, the Chinese people exercise state power by democratically elected representatives (The State Council Information Office, 2005). This approach is particularly relevant for Chinese people who have frequently “been represented” (被代表) (China Digital Times, 2012), a sarcastic term to describe how people have been compelled to be represented by certain representatives that have been selected by the authorities in their favor and that the government is providing only the appearance of representation without the genuine substance of representation.

In addition, as Nathan indicates, “...the regime admits, and everyone knows, that its authority has never been subject to popular review and is never intended to be” (Nathan, 2009: 38). Under this circumstance, this mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere contributes to a *direct* means to participate in and influence politics by

articulating people's experiences, reflecting their wishes, and expressing their grievances. In this way, the mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere makes it possible for ordinary people, in particular the communication have-nots, to project their interests into the political agenda, thus enhancing the capability of ordinary citizen to influence politics and promoting the process of democratization in the context of China.

Moreover, for this sphere to work well, we should pay attention to the fact that it not only provides a means of expression, interaction, and communication, but more importantly offers an approach to help people connect with each other, accumulate individual force into collective force, and tie people's experiences to each other: in short, it encourages people to care about each other. As a result, the title of my dissertation—“*MOBILIZED BY MOBILE MEDIA*”—has a two-fold meaning. On the one hand, the mobile phone offers and, to a certain degree, empowers each person in his or her struggle against the authorities (i.e., people have been mobilized by mobile media to express their voices and make them heard). On the other hand, each person should also be mobilized so as to learn to hear those voices that have been “sunk” in the dominant public sphere (i.e., people have been mobilized by the mobile media to hear other people's voices and unite).

8.3 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study resonates with and further reflects on some current research trends; it also offers directions for future research.

First, by addressing the importance of the right to communication, this study highlights the relevance of communication in everyday life in general and its power

on resistant activities and the democratic process in particular. This emphasis resonates with current works about the need for government, academia, and society to take a greater interest in the vital role of communication and to recognize the major shift that has come with the specific importance of communication in society (Castells, 2009; Jensen, 2010). Accordingly, future studies should focus on people's communicative needs, their struggles for the right to communication, and the power of communication that they generate and consolidate to promote the process of democratization through easily accessible communication media.

Second, this study calls for more attention to the impact of cultural elements on the adoption and usage of [mobile] technology in different societies. Although there are already a good number of studies that examine, for instance, the impact of culture on mobile communication (Goggin, 2006, 2008; Chu, Fortunati, Law, & Yang, 2012), more systematic—and further comparative—studies are still badly needed for a deeper understanding of how culture shapes mobile technology and vice versa. In addition, as Castell points out: “[T]he process of social change requires the reprogramming of the communication networks in terms of their cultural codes and in terms of the implicit social and political values and interests that they convey” (Castells, 2009: 302). Therefore, future studies should investigate how different cultural backgrounds—including the associated and often implicit social and political values and interests—affect the process of social change through shaping and reprogramming communication technology and communication networks.

Third, in order to get a more accurate understanding of the role and use of (new) media in political activities—including contentious ones—studies should recognize people's experience in their use and appropriation of media. In other words, studies should focus on how people make the most of their available and accessible media

resources to achieve their goals. As this study and Nielsen's (2011) demonstrate, to a large extent, people still rely on the very basic functions of new media—the calling and texting functions of mobile phones, or surfing websites on the internet—rather than advanced and complex ones. Basing our argument on people's experience in practice helps us to avoid exaggerating or overstating the role and use of technology. To achieve this, on the one hand, at least for researches aiming at offering a nuanced account of new media practices and their implications in everyday life, we need more *qualitative* approaches, such as participant observations and in-depth interviews.

On the other hand, we should look beyond those eyes-catching, revolutionary moments¹ to probe into the political implication of *mundane use of new media* in everyday life. More specifically, the heavy emphasis on the role of new media in specific contentious issues overlooks *indirect* but *cumulative* impacts from the mundane uses of new media in everyday experience, failing to capture, reflect, and assess the political potential embedded in the routine use of new media—beyond a simple realization of overt contentious possibility. Importantly, as many studies have already demonstrated, the integration of the new media into daily life means that they are penetrating, and further integral to, everyday practice and experience (e.g., Lister, 2003; Goggin, 2006; Ling & Campbell, 2009). In this way, new media shape and influence the habitual practices of people's everyday lives, in particular the political dimension of everyday practices (Certeau, 1984), no matter how unobtrusively. Meanwhile, with the increasing infiltration of new media into all areas of daily life, everyday experience has become ever more relevant to “mediated politics” (Bennett & Entman, 2001) in the new media age (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002). Consequently, further study is needed to *look beyond* “eye-grabbing” events to probe

¹ For instance, the Facebook Revolution in Iran in 2009 and 2010 and the Twitter Revolution in Egypt in 2011.

into the political implication of *mundane use of new media* in everyday life, in particular what kind of—and how—*covert resistance* (Scott, 1985, 1990) has been incorporated into and reflected at the level of everyday use of new media.

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SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the use of the mobile phone in contentious politics in contemporary China. It undertakes a qualitative analysis of multiple cases to investigate how Chinese people adopt and appropriate mobile media to meet their communication needs, struggle against the authorities, and facilitate an inexpensive counter-public sphere. Drawing on Negt and Kluge's conceptual framework of the counter-public sphere, specifically, this study addresses the role of the mobile phone in guaranteeing the right to communication, which not only articulates the lived experiences of social and political exclusion but also ensures a relatively independent communicative sphere for counter-publics beyond the dominant public sphere in contemporary China. This study aims at contributing to the field of mobile communication studies, as illuminated by theories of counter-publics and by taking China as the center piece.

Chapter One recalls the emerging role of the mobile phone as a resource against the authoritarian regime and its highly controlled official media sectors in China. By addressing the term “*hexie*” (harmonious), a key word of the Communist Party of China's political slogans in recent years, it calls attention to the fact that the expression and communication of certain individuals or groups have been severely impaired or suppressed in the name of maintaining “harmony” in contemporary China.

Chapter Two confronts the issue of communication control in contemporary China. By introducing the term “the communication have-nots,” it contextualizes the concept of “counter-publics” while highlighting the control over public communication and the suppression of the voice of the public at large in the dominant public sphere in China.

Chapter Three offers readers an account of the history and current state of media, communication, and democracy in China and a literature review of media and democracy in contemporary China. More importantly, it introduces Negt and Kluge's counter-public sphere theory as the theoretical framework of this study.

Chapter Four justifies this dissertation's research strategy and design, highlighting (a) mobile media as both the research object and a research tool and (b) the application of respondent-driven sampling to both mobile social network studies and the field of contentious politics in China.

Chapter Five to Seven present empirical findings regarding mobile-phone-facilitated collective resistance and popular protests in contemporary China. *Chapter Five* concentrates on the culture-specific characteristics of mobile social networks in China and elaborates on the *guanxi*-embedded mobile social network as a specific hotbed for political mobilization and participation in China. *Chapter Six* elaborates on mobile phone rumor as a new form of online public resistance while *Chapter Seven* demonstrates the role of the mobile phone in facilitating a counter-public sphere in offline popular protest.

Chapter Eight presents a conclusion regarding the role of mobile media as “the weapons of the weak” for Chinese people and characterizes an emerging mobile-phone-facilitated counter-public sphere in contemporary China.

RESUMÉ

Denne afhandling undersøger brugen af mobiltelefoner i forbindelse med politisk deltagelse i det moderne Kina. Der foretages en kvalitativ analyse af forskellige cases med det formål at undersøge, hvordan kinesere tilegner sig mobile medier for at få dækket deres kommunikationsbehov, konfrontere politiske autoriteter, samt for at skabe en billig modoffentlig sfære. Baseret på Negt og Kluges konceptuelle ramme for en modoffentlige sfære (Gegenöffentlichkeit), retter denne afhandling sig specifikt mod mobiltelefonens rolle i relation til retten til at kommunikere. Fokus er ikke kun borgernes oplevede erfaringer af social og politisk eksklusion, men også den relativt frie kommunikation, som modoffentlige bevægelser gennemfører over for den dominerende offentlige sfære i det moderne Kina. Denne afhandling har således til formål at bidrage til forskningen om mobil kommunikation gennem undersøgelser af modoffentlige bevægelser med Kina som fokuspunkt.

Kapitel Et ser tilbage på mobiltelefonens rolle som en ressource mod autoritære regimers strenge kontrol med de officielle medier i Kina. Ved at anvende termen "hexie" (harmonisk), som er et af det kinesiske Kommunistpartis mest anvendte politisk slogans, rettes opmærksomheden mod det faktum, at mange individers og grupperes ytringsfrihed og kommunikation bliver alvorligt begrænset eller undertrykt under dække af, at man ville opretholde "harmoni" i det moderne Kina.

Kapitel To tager spørgsmålet om kontrol med kommunikation i det moderne Kina op. Med termen "the communication have-nots," sættes begrebet modoffentlighed ind i en konkret kulturel sammenhæng, samtidig med at der sættes fokus på den kontrol med den offentlige kommunikation og den undertrykkelse af den offentlige stemme, som er fremherskende i den dominerende offentlige sfære i Kina.

Kapitel Tre tilbyder læserne et indblik i, hvordan medier, kommunikation og demokrati fungerer i Kina samt et review af tidligere forskning om medier og demokrati i det moderne Kina. Endvidere uddybes Negt og Kluges teori om modoffentlighed som den teoretiske ramme for denne afhandling.

Kapitel Fire fremlægger afhandlingens forskningsdesign, og belyser (a) mobile medier som både forskningens objekt og forskningens redskab samt (b) anvendelsen af "respondent-driven sampling" til undersøgelser af mobile sociale netværk inden for politisk deltagelse i Kina.

Kapitel Fem til Syv præsenterer afhandlingens empiriske resultater vedrørende brugen af mobiltelefoner i kollektiv aktivisme og folkelige protester i det moderne Kina.

Kapitel Fem koncentrerer sig specifikt om "guanxi" som et grundlag for mobile sociale netværk, der bidrager til mobilisering og folkelig deltagelse i Kina. *Kapitel Seks* uddyber, hvordan rygter spredes gennem mobiltelefoner og derved bidrager til at skabe en modoffentlighed i form af offline protester. *Kapitel Otte* præsenterer afhandlingens konklusion vedrørende mobile mediers rolle som "de svages våben" i Kina og karakteriserer samtidig den igangværende udvikling inden for brugen af mobiltelefoner i modoffentligheden i det moderne Kina.