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Mobile Phones and Politics in China

From Texting to Mobilizing

Jun LIU

The penetration of mobile phones in Chinese daily life has made collective actions easier to organize and challenged government censorship. Highlighting this new form of communication, the following essay shows how the traditional mass media's role as gatekeeper is waning.

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 *real-world* mobilization of collective action and the subsequent initiation, organization, and implementation of social movements. In the spring of 2011, the world watched as online and mobile-phone-facilitated, twitter-based revolutionary fervor swept the Middle East. 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 a context of increasing use of mobile devices in social activism, social movements, and contentious politics.

Likewise, the proliferation of mobile phones in China nurtures growing mobile-phone-facilitated popular protests, in which the increasing use of mobile media is a key resource not just for the dissemination of censored information, but more importantly for facilitating demonstrations and strikes and triggering “mass incidents” (*quntixing shijian*), the Chinese state's euphemism for strikes, street protests, and other forms of mass protests, particularly involving violent conflicts. Recent examples include the text-message-mobilized peaceful march (*sanbu*) in Xiamen in 2007 against chemical plants and the mobile-phone-triggered Weng'an and Shishou riots in 2008 and 2009. Nevertheless, very few studies address systematically the role of mobile phones in contentious politics in contemporary China, leaving this field almost blank. As early as 2003, mobile phone helped citizens break through government censorship, getting the message of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic across to the public through text messages¹. In recent years, ubiquitous mobile communication has had

¹ Ringo Ma, “Media, Crisis, and SARS: An introduction”, *Asian Journal of Communication*, vol. 15, n° 3, pp. 241-246; Arthur Kleinman & James L. Watson, *SARS in China: Prelude to pandemic?* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006.

a growing influence on Chinese politics and society. I propose to discuss the role of the mobile phone 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 (*guanxi*, social network, connections); third, the mobile device as multi-media platform. By looking at the role of mobile phones in politics in the specific socio-political context of China, we will generate new insights reaching beyond current research on Internet-based activism.

The Mobile Phone as a Mundane Communication Tool

With the rapid dissemination of mobile devices, mobile phones have become simple yet essential tools for mundane communication in everyday life.¹ 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]) with a convenient means of accumulating individual power, mobilizing collective action, and coordinating contentious movements. For instance, Southeast China residents forced the relocation of chemical plants in Xiamen in 2007 through demonstrations that were initiated and coordinated largely by text message. In 2008, thousands of mobile-phone-mobilized 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 the cover-up over a 16-year-old girl’s “unusual death.” Forwarding and relaying the calls and text-messages on long complaints about the increased operating costs and traffic fines from government and taxi companies, thousands of taxi drivers went on a strike in Chongqing, quickly followed in Wuhan, Hainan, Gansu, Guangdong, and other provinces in 2008 and 2009.

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. Put differently, because of the party-state’s control over and constraints on public communication, people have been forced to adapt whatever kind of communication tools they have access to, including those for (inter)personal communication—the mobile phone being the most popular and convenient option—to create an autonomous communication sphere, beyond and against the party-dominant public sphere. This has been pointed out 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”². As such, the mobile phone allows Chinese citizens, even those without abundant finances or technical

¹ James E. Katz & Mark Aakhus, *Perpetual Contact: Mobile communication, private talk, public performance*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Manuel Castells, Mireia Fernandez-Ardevol, Jack Linchuan Qui, and Araba Sey, *Mobile Communication and Society: A global perspectives*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007; Richard Ling, *Taken for Grantedness: The embedding of mobile communication into society*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012.

² Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p.65.

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 importantly, as mobile phone use penetrates both people's everyday lives and government's propaganda campaigns, the conventional methods of control have become, 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. Firstly, because government officials rely on mobile services to stay in contact with each other and carry out daily work, just like ordinary citizens if not more so. Secondly, the government integrates mobile services as part of its propaganda system. In this context, 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. Thirdly, if the government cut off mobile telecommunication services, this would not only impact politically active citizens, but also alert those who previously did not pay attention to or care about politically sensitive topics to the fears of a government willing to sacrifice the interest of the public at large to benefit its political interest. If this situation happened, 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's flexibility and adaptability as a mundane communication tool enables ordinary Chinese people to breach the constraints of censorship, contravene government control, and initiate and coordinate protests and resistance movements.

Mobile Communication in *Guanxi*-Embedded Chinese Society

In his study of Chinese Internet culture and politics, Yang¹ criticizes “technology without people” and “Internet without culture”. Likewise², current studies on mobile communication in China fail to pay enough attention to how *guanxi* (social connections), 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

¹ Guobin Yang, “Technology and Its Contents: Issues in the study of the Chinese internet”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 70, n° 4, 2011, pp. 1043-1050.

² As I argue elsewhere: Jun Liu, “Mobile Social Network in a Cultural Context”, In Enrique Canessa & Marco Zennaro (dir.), *M-SCIENCE: Sensing, Computing and Dissemination*, Trieste: ICTP - The Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics, 2010, pp. 211-240.

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? With the huge rise in mobile phone use in developing and maintaining social relations, the dynamics of *guanxi* have become embedded into both mobile communication and mobile social networks. 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 more likely to trust and disseminate these messages. In other words, such a process makes mobile phone users easily credulous towards the messages they receive via their mobile social network, in cases where the influence of *guanxi* hinders judgments based on reason or facts. Because of this, low-cost, convenient, and highly efficient mobile communication contributes to the quasi-mass communication of censored or mobilizing messages throughout 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.

Guanxi-embedded mobile communication thus creates a basis for consensus, increasing the likelihood of engagement in collective actions, such as spreading rumors and participating demonstrations. It includes identity verification (e.g. who sent me this message? Whom shall I send messages to?), while increasing an individual's awareness and sense of safety in engagement by creating the perception of concrete support from one's mobile social network. In other words, when people engage in *guanxi*-based mobile communication, they know that they are not alone. Rather, both they and people in their social network are participating in a certain event together. At an emotional level, *guanxi*-based mobile communication creates a sense of safety in numbers, inviting and encouraging engagement and participation in both online public resistance and offline popular protests. In this way, the specific structure of *guanxi*-embedded mobile communication creates a unique mechanism for mobilisation of social networks and contentious activities.

For instance, in the case of rumors spreading through mobile social network, it is not just that "I hear a rumor" or that "I know that other people hear the rumor as well," but that "I know that the people I know [such as intimates, colleagues, and so on] also receive and forward this rumor." Mobile communication intertwined with *guanxi*-based personal influence generates a situational awareness shared by known individuals, who are also aware they are not alone in their situational awareness. This kind of awareness shapes people's thoughts and feelings, greatly encouraging them to join "mutually recognized engagement."¹ That is why mobile communication can easily trigger social disturbances in contemporary Chinese society.

¹ Richard Ling, *New Tech, New Ties: How mobile communication is reshaping social cohesion*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008, p. xi.

Mobiles and the Rise of Citizen Journalism

Last but not least, 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 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, and generating a new form of “mediated visibility”¹ in Chinese society. Images or videos captured by civilians with the camera on their mobile phones on the scene of, for instance, forced demolition or popular protests, have frequently been uploaded and viewed by the people of China and the world via Weibo, Chinese microblogging websites, YouTube, and even mainstream media. The ease with which content can be both created and shared with local and global audiences undermines the gatekeeper role held until now by the traditional mass media. 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 the 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.

Mobile Phones as “Weapons of the Weak”

To sum up, the role of the mobile phone as a communication 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 the only 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 ICT platforms (e.g., the internet or social networking), the achievements of mobile media are not largely the result of a “liberation technology” (this term has been used by “Liberation Technology Program” at Stanford University to address the role information technology can play in defending human rights, empowering the poor, and pursuing a variety of other social goods²). This does not necessarily mean that technology is not the answer. Rather, as Stengel highlights:

¹ John B. Thompson, (2005). “The New Visibility”. *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 22, n° 6, 2005, pp. 31-51.

² See, for instance, Patrick Meier, *Do "Liberation Technologies" Change the Balance of Power Between Repressive States and Civil Society?*, Tufts University, Medford, USA, 2011.

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 all¹.

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 “weapon of the weak”,² on the one hand. It allows Chinese people to harness their creativity and ingenuity, 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. Specifically, ten years ago, Ethan Gutmann³ 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 1 billion subscribers, an average of around four out of every five people. There can be no doubt that mobile phones play an increasingly relevant role in facilitating collective actions and mobilizing civic engagement. Studying the emerging role of mobile phone in political participation, citizenry engagement, and contentious politics in contemporary China should make a major contribution to contemporary research on political protest and digital democracy.

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¹ Rick Stengel, “2011 Person of the Year: Introduction”. *Time*, Vol.178, 2011, December 26, p.53.

² James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press, 1985.

³ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China's Internet?”

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