

Mobilized by Mobile Media

-- China's Transitional Communication Order, Societal Changes and Citizenship¹

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ABSTRACT Digital technology has expanded mobile phone's potential from a talking device to increasingly the weapons against authoritarian rule and censorship. After eighteen years of development, the number of mobile users in China had surpassed 659 million, an average of one in less than two people. As the content is largely unknowable, unpredictable and unregulated, mobile media succeeds in breaching the information blockage, helping Chinese people receive the outside world information, maintain contact with each other and make political waves in an increasingly aggressive battle for control over information. The aim of this paper is to think critically about how their positioning and interests shape Chinese people's understandings of mobile media, and trying to answer the question how has mobile media changed Chinese people's information dissemination, political participation and democratic expression. Spread via cell phones as a personal approach with proximity and higher credibility, directives and even rumors create a cascading effect that inflames public passions and make turbulences in society. With a participatory ethos, mobile media in both rural and urban areas struggles for economic survival, social justice and legality, and seeks to build an inexpensive virtual counter-public sphere. The political significance of mobile media 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 technique, posing challenges in governance and forcing the authorities to engage with new kinds of media practices. These processes -- within the counter-public sphere and political space -- de-balance China's conventional national public spheres, because on the individual level they shape political identities, notions of citizenship in the evolution of the mobile media creating sphere. The government must figure out how to improve the effective and regular information exchange and feedback top down and bottom up to raise the awareness and understanding among higher decision making agencies, government and the public. Telephony is redefining the role of the citizen -- endowing the individual with more responsibility and command over how he/she consumes information -- and this new role is beginning to be understood in China.

KEYWORDS: Mobile Media; China; Public sphere; Counter-public sphere; Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

1 I wish to thank Dr. Poul Erik Nielsen, University of Aarhus, Professor Klaus Bruhn Jensen, University of Copenhagen, and Associate Professor Jørgen B. Bang, University of Aarhus, for their invaluable suggestions on earlier proposal of this paper.

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THE UBIQUITOUS MOBILE PHONE AND POPULAR OPINION IN CHINA'S NEW MEDIA ERA

The rapid progresses in the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and widespread usage of mobile phone make people much easier and more convenient to communicate with each other (see, for example, Ito, M. et al., 2005; Traugott, M. et al., 2006; Castells, M. et al., 2004; Katz, J.E., & Aakhus. M., 2002). The vibrant expanding of Chinese wireless telephony has also seen the number of cell phone subscribers skyrocket from 47,544 in 1991 to over 659 million in 2009, an average of almost one in two people, after eighteen years of development (MIIT, 2001 & 2009, see Table 1). The constant reduction of costs for information transfer and sharing is the biggest factor driving the continuous development of ICTs, making China the biggest mobile communication powerhouse in the world since 2005 (*Beijing Evening News*, 2005). Worried by the digital gap, on the other hand, the government launched a “Telephone into Every Village” campaign in 2004 and provided connections for every village in remote areas by telephone fixed lined and mobile phone, aiming at the first step towards correcting the social and economic imbalance that is opening up between villages and cities across China (China Mobile, 2006). Even in the far-flung villages and poorest sections of society, everywhere you can see people carry mobile phones, as well as thousands of cell phone advertising painted on houses or walls.

TABLE 1

Mobile phone and Internet use, selected countries, end of 2007 (Units: million)

	Total Mobile subscribers	Per 100 people			Ratio of:	
		Mobile Lines	Fixed Lines	Internet Users	Mobile to fixed	Mobile to Internet
World	3,350,582.8	50.08	19.12	20.79	2.6	2.4
Mainland China	547,306	41.19	27.52	12.3	1.5	3.3
United States	255,395.6	83.51	53.35	70.2	1.6	1.2
India	233.620	19.98	3.37	3.7	5.9	5.4
Japan	107.339	83.88	40.04	68.0	2.1	1.2
Germany	97.151	117.62	65.07	61.1	1.8	1.9
United Kingdom	71,992.5	118.47	55.43	63.8	2.1	1.9

Source: International Telecommunication Union (2008). <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/>

At the same time all of us make the experiences that the services provided by this wireless telecommunication technology affect the way we live and work, alter how we socialize and learn, while mobile phones have become indispensable as imparting an “infinite power” upon individuals and society (Katz, J.E., 2006; Brown, B. et al., 2002; Cooper, G. et al., 2005). Modern telephony services have expanded mobile phone’s potential from a talking device to increasingly the weapons against authoritarian rule and censorship, doing new things one had not even previously thought of (Nyiri, K., 2003; Vries D., 2005: 42-62). In China, news about the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic spread through mobile phone and the Internet in the first half of 2003, intensifying rumors and public fear and causing credit panic, when the government kept it secret from the public by withholding information and suppressing mass media in reporting the situation (Tai Z.X. & Sun T., 2007: 933). Chinese youths in 2005 sent text messages and chain-letter e-mails exhorting citizens to boycott Japanese merchandise and take to the streets, giving logistical information on protest routes and even what slogans to chant in over ten cities. Serving the same purpose, Short Message Service (SMS) and calls via mobile phones calling for boycotts of French Carrefour and other foreign retailers went rampant in China in 2008 in response to the disruptions of the Olympic torch relay in Paris.

Compared with these seeming a somewhat patriotic use, the rapid popularization of wireless telephony backbone also creates a communication revolution, and the individual, through the advent of mobile phone, has become an active political participant in this process. Based on the largely unknowable, unpredictable and unregulated cellphone content, mobile media succeeds in breaching the information blockage, helping Chinese people receive the outside world information, coordinate a wide range of activities including large-scale protests and make bottom-up, people-based political waves in an aggressive battle for control over information when the publicity-sensitive government makes concerted attempts not only to register the Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) cards and ID cards but also to block those messages at source (Lu, J., & Weber, I., 2007: 933; AFP, 2008). Depending on mobile phone information outside mass media, Xiamen citizens rallied against a chemical plant threatening the seaside environment, urged the government to renounce plans and even demanded the resignation of the city’s Communist Party Secretary. Calls and text messages played a key role in intensified and dispersed mass incidents in rural areas, such as the 2006 Rui’an protests and the 2008 Weng’an riot, in which thousands of people demonstrated in front the government buildings or besieged the police headquarters and unleashed their anger (AP, 2006; Xinhua, 2008a). Tainted-milk scare SMS made its rounds via wireless telephony network while the unfounded fear from the text messages about maggots in the fruits sparked the orange scare and sent the market crashing across the country in 2008.

The aim of this paper is to think critically about the political effects of mobile phone diffusion, or how the positioning and political interests shape Chinese people’s understandings

of mobile media. The key question is: How has mobile media changed Chinese people's information dissemination, democratic expression and political participation?

China's "new media", including mobile phone and the Internet, appear to be reaching a critical mass nationwide, when news of unrest is usually blocked out of the government-controlled media. Since the 2003 SARS epidemic mobile media leads to greater openness and the freer information flow and becomes a dramatic illustration of the potential of technology to challenge the rigorous information filtering system over the Internet. (Chinese Human Rights Defenders, 2007:2). As Chinese people seeing mobile phone as a ubiquitous necessity, using it in more and more way, what's "new" about mobile media in the political use? The empirical discussions aim to shed light on the advantages and limitations of mobile phone for political purpose and try to answer several questions. How does information coming via mobile phone influence mobile users' participation? How can Chinese citizen utilize mobile media for political purposes beyond the daily communication?

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES, MOBILE DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC SPHERE

Democracy is being enacted through digital communication technology in many forms. However, democracy is not possible without a functioning political public sphere that puts the individual in a position to decide and act autonomously (Meyer, T., 2002: 1; Calhoun, C., 2005). Based upon the ideal of a “deliberative” as opposed to merely “informed” public, the notion of the public sphere in Jürgen Habermas’ theory is a “public” space between the state and civil society in which citizens can debate issues of common concern. More precisely, as a critical role in the public sphere with this understanding, the media should help the citizens to exchange views on matters of importance to the common good and gather to discuss issues of political concern, to attract support, to operate as representative vehicles of the views of their supporters, to protest effectively; and outline various alternative arguments and actions (Habermas, J., 1989: 27; Curran, J., 1991: 103). Therefore, a well-functioning public sphere is dependant not only on the access to pertinent mass media information about the actions of governmental institutions but also on the opportunities for citizens to engage in rational and critical deliberation that results in the formation of public opinion and the shaping of governmental conduct (Negt, O., & Kluge, A., 1993).

However, the role of traditional media in modern democracy is increasingly problematic, and severe problems have arisen about its capacity as a site for political criticism or rational debate (Morley, D., 1996: 15; Poster, M., 1999). Consequently, there has been an accelerating growth of a relative literature in the West where experts research widely on the impact and implementation of ICTs on societies and public sphere both in industrial democracies and developing countries (See, for example, Dahlberg, L., 2001; Gimmler, A., 2001). To date, Internet access also has been expanding rapidly and extensively due to direct supports and promotion by Chinese government. Many studies emerge and argue that the Internet has increasingly become the prime gate for the public into government bureaucracies and their services in the information age (see, for example, Yang G.B., 2007; 2003; Li Z., 2003). What the above studies did not mention is that the remaining 56 percent add up to a whopping 652 million rural inhabitants that are yet to be connected by the Internet in the world’s most populous country (CNNIC, 2009; Xinhuanet, 2007a). China's internet penetration is still low at just 22.6 percent while the Internet has to face technological and demographic challenges at first¹ (CNNIC, 2009). In fact, people without a satisfactory virtual-world experience are spread all over the vast countryside, especially in Western China -- the most deprived region in China -- alone accounting for 300 million rural inhabitants, let alone the political participation in the Internet-based virtual public sphere (National Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

¹ Bruce Bimber, for example, coins the phrase “accelerated pluralism” to show that the Internet will facilitate grassroots mobilization and civic organization, and it will particularly accelerate the process of “...an intensification of group-centered, pluralistic politics. See Bimber B., 1998: 133-160.

On the other hand, currently those who gain internet access through China service providers are still subject to the government's sophisticated Internet-monitoring and filtering system, which blocks access to web sites containing excessive information considered detrimental or hostile to the country. Another problem deserves our full attention is that commercialization has transformed the Internet into a more diversified, market-driven media company. People holding such a digital tool might not be fully aware of the power of the weapon before they fall into the trap of those using the Internet to pursue their dubious interests, such as the notorious Baidu-Sanlu Kidney Stone Gate in 2008¹. The potential of the Internet to operate as a virtual public sphere for ordinary people therefore is limited (Papacharissi, Z., 2002; Wilhelm, A.G., 2000).

Studies have well noted that the mode of mobile phone-mediated communications utilized by individuals and civil network groups could shape and facilitate grassroots democracy, bring ordinary people, opposition parties and dissent groups into the democratic participatory processes, challenge the political power, and cure the flaws of democratic government, such as in Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, voters turnout in the 2004 Spanish general election, the president election in late 2002 in South Korea, or even bring down a government in "People Power II" in Philippines (Goldstein, J., 2007; Suarez, S. L., 2006; MacKinnon R., 2005; Rafael, V.L., 2003). When some critical studies assert that mobility can erodes personal space, reinforce central hierarchical imperial power, or have the ability to disrupt the structure of social interaction at several levels (Agar J., 2005: 162; Ling R., 2004: 142-143; Ito, M. et al, 2005: 6), Rheingold (2002: xi) states in his work, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, that the mobile networks, the new information-centered technological revolution, now "enable people to act together in new ways and in situations where collective action was not possible before". Rheingold's visions have inspired others to explore the possibility of renewing the public debate, consultation, and decision-making amongst the citizenry. Hjelm J. (2000) declared that following the Internet revolution is the mobile revolution and society will be marked by mobile, "Always on" citizens, government, as well as the transient online communities.

In another aspect, taking mobile messaging services, an important new set of communication practices in China, Latham K. (2007) and Qiu L.C. (2007) investigate the transforming relationships among Chinese media, power, political subjectivity and social control. Based on Braman's "transformational", Lu, J., & Weber, I. (2007) focus on three draconian forms of control under authoritarian rule in telecommunications and information industry assists the Chinese government, including less overt control to respond to market changes, subsequent success in directing economic development and the process of modernizations, and a less obtrusive control environment to reinforce the government's relevancy in society. But such a

1 As China's top search engine, Baidu, originally should be to assemble all sites, has been paid to suppress negative news or information about Sanlu in their search engine. See Fauna (2008a, 2008b); Sanlu, Baidu, and That Damned Olympic, <http://seagullreference.blogspot.com/2008/09/sanlu-baidu-and-damned-olympic.html>, accessed 2 November 2008; *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (2008).

focus of attention is accompanied by negligence of issues pertaining to larger units of analysis, with regard to the relationship between mobile phone and structural changes of mainland China's public sphere, of which mobile messaging services is merely one part (Yeung L.K., 2008). Yet there is little work done which can tackle the issue of the impact or implication of mobile phone-mediate social movements -- whether it be the nationalistic protests against Japan or France or the Falun Gong meditation cult (Zhao Y.Z., 2007: 102-104) -- for the public sphere mechanism in contemporary China. As Latham (2007: 296) states, "media and communications have played a fundamental part in the construction of Chinese political subjectivity, and hence citizenship". The multi-function mobile phone as a medium affords a good model to find out how the digital wireless telephony and ordinary Chinese people interact, in attempts to explain the specific context of the socio-techno-cultural repercussion and information ecologies of China that make it something of an outlier case against Habermas' bourgeois public sphere or in comparison to Asian countries (Calhoun, C., 1993; Qiu, L.C. & Thompson, E., 2007: 89). As the current mobile information revolution sweeping across China has widen the ordinary citizen's access to information, it also impels us to ponder whether the mobile revolution, beyond its interpersonal repercussion, may pose any impact upon other arenas such as politics and society in China, where public opinion has been usually thought to be under the party and government, and thus influenced by being limited to only official information sources and also guided by state-imposed agendas. What factors have contributed to the successful use of mobile phones as tool for democratic expression and political participation in China? In what cases had mobile media succeeded, and why? Using the less commonly considered mobile phone-mediated popular contentions as examples of telecommunications, this research is expected to yield a number of contributions that could be related to the wider themes of (virtual) public sphere and public service in China.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Because of popular contentions' sensitive, it is almost impossible to discover its real extent. The first problem is a "media-censorship barrier" -- the difference between what really happens and what has been covered. But in most cases popular contention is only known about by the mass after its public exposure in the traditional media. The second is "sensitivity barrier" -- the difference between what has been found out and what information is available for academic. No country, including China, is willing to disclose to the public or academia all the information they hold on popular contentions. Privacy protection also makes it difficult to acquire detailed information of mobile use and interviewees' answers to the questionnaires, in addition to the contextual detail missing and cost in conducting large-sample quantitative research. It's therefore impossible to perform a reliable and comprehensive analysis on all popular contentions from China's transitional period.

Mixed-method research, as a result, provides advantages as a second-best choice not only in descriptive approaches but in quantitative information collection from publications and media reports of popular contentions as objects of analysis¹. Easy availability of data is one advantage. However, its disadvantage is also obvious: cases are not randomly selected, affecting the reliability.

In order to develop new tools to extract more out the limited available information and make our discussions closer to reality, the multiple-case study is applied as one critical resource to highlight the typical issues in China's mobile phone-mediated mass incidents. Data draws from cases involving the spontaneous use of mobile phone during popular contentions and the practice of information distribution within the context of the civilian and the spread of mass opinion with screening criteria (Yin R.K., 2003). This study is not an attempt to explain the various factors that caused the popular contention cases, but instead explains to what extent mobile phone influences the popular contentions. The first narrative case study is to examine the role of mobile phone during the 2007 Xiamen anti-PX demonstrations, one of the biggest middle-class protests of recent years (*The Economist*, 2007), in which the government shelved a chemical plant after protests ricocheted by mobile phone indicating possible detriment it might bring to people's health condition. The following cases are mobile phone-support deep-seated resentment in the poor community in China's rural areas. The case study, not meant to be representative of all of China, offers a close look at the idiographic popular contentions and shows that the outcome achieved from fighting for democracy in the evolution of mobile media created sphere.

Recruiting the key people (e.g. professors, journalists, students and NGO leaders) as "seeds",

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

this study uses Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS) to reach the hard-to-reach groups in anti-PX demonstrations. Combining the coverage breadth of network-based methods with the statistical validity of standard chain-referral sampling methods, RDS bases on populations with a personal contact pattern as mobile phone works, overcomes the expense of introducing bias and provides certain financial incentives for interviewees to recruit each other for person, one-to-one interviews (Heckathorn, D.D., 2002; Salganik, M.J. & Heckathorn, D.D., 2004). Our study sample is composed of 87 interviewees from journalist, students to NGO leaders and local peasants. Instead of reaching only the most visible, vocal loudest protests, the greatest benefit of RDS in this study is that it helps to encourage ordinary people to speak openly and allows us to learn about the network patterns of cellphone-mobilized demonstration.

Based on peer recruitment, I began the study by inviting five to eight interviewees to help start the project. These interviewees of wide and large network of relationships in the community or virtual online community, are not necessarily famous or very visible, but with many contacts because RDS depends on a high contact pattern of the subject studies. Each of these interviewees was interviewed in person in a friendly environment. Following the interview, each of these “seeds” was given three some souvenirs, with which to recruit additional interviewees. We planned to pay the initial “seeds” 30 yuan (4.4 USD) for each additional interviewee. The limit set on both souvenir and payment incentives was intended to avoid over-representing on particular group of interviewees to the exclusion of others. Actually the most interesting finding was the interviewees’ deep desire to reef off their anti-PX stories without compensation.

The mixed method ethnography with semi-structured interviews are mainly adopted for a detailed snapshot of how the samples, from the middle class to students in metropolis cities, use wireless service to explore their identities and create new ones when I spent two 10-days interviewing them and recording their answers. With an open-ended questionnaire, interviews can make up for the lack of macro-analysis in quantitative methods.

MOBILE MEDIA, ANTI-PX “WALK”¹ AND POLICY OVERTHROW IN XIAMEN

Located on the southeastern coast of China, Xiamen, a sub-provincial city in Fujian province, covers a total area of 1,565 square kilometers and has a permanent population of 2.43 million at the end of 2007² (Xiamen Bureau of Statistics, 2008). As one of the most important ports in China for international trade and cross-Straits trade, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Xiamen has increased at an average rate of 18 percent since 1980 and GDP per capita reached over 7,000 USD in 2007, ranking top 9 among Chinese cities (People’s Daily Online, 2008; Lin Z.Y., 2007). Besides the economic development, Xiamen is well-known for its clean and tidy environment. As early as 2002, Xiamen received the Gold Medal at the ‘International Nations in Bloom’ competition in Stuttgart, Germany. It won the China Human Settlements and Environment Award from China's Ministry of Construction in 2003. Also, it achieved the UN-Habitat Scroll of Honor Award 2004, which is presented for initiatives that have made outstanding contributions to human settlements development and improving the quality of life in cities and communities around the world (UN-HABITAT, 2004). Residents of Xiamen have long been proud of their city's natural beauty as “China's cleanest city”.

The PX plant in “China’s cleanest city”

Just in Xiamen, the construction of a giant chemical plant had been in progress since 2004. The Paraxylene (well-known by its abbreviation “PX” later) plant, being built by the Tenglong Aromatic PX (Xiamen) Co Ltd. and Xianglu Petrochemical (Xiamen) Co Ltd., was to make paraxylene, which is used in productions of plastics, polyester and other synthetic. Short-term exposure to paraxylene, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, can cause eye, ear, nose and throat irritations and, with prolonged exposure, damage to the nervous system in humans (AP, 2007). The plant, estimated to cost 10.8 billion yuan (1.4 billion USD), was expected to produce 800,000 tones of paraxylene and generate an annual revenue of 80 billion yuan (10.4 billion USD), which is equal to one forth of the GDP of Xiamen in 2007. After put into production, the PX project would double the city’s gross value of industrial output to 280 billion yuan (36.3 billion USD) from 116.2 billion yuan (15.1 billion USD) (Xiamen Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

As one of the seven large-scale PX project in the list of seven “115” PX projects by the State Development and Reform Commission (SDRC), The Xiamen PX plant project 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 2005³

1 Chinese people prefer “walk”, a euphemism for “demonstration”, a much more sensitive politically-loaded term, to describe their demonstrations against some unpopular events, such as the “200-people's group walk” in Chengdu to express their concerns over the environmental impact the construction of two plants may have on their city, see Huang Z.L. (2008).

2 This study uses the statistics in 2007 for the convenience of comparison.

3 The rest of the six PX project located in Nanjing, Guangdong, Dalian, Fuzhou, Huizhou and Qingdao. Demand for chemicals such as paraxylene is soaring as China’s manufacturing industries expand.

(*China Newsweek*, 2007; Yuan Yue, 2007). But all these assessments and ratifications, little known to the public, haven't come into under the public eye until Zhao Yufen, a U.S.-trained professor in the School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Xiamen University, started the campaign against the Haicang-PX project during the "Two Congresses"¹ in March 2007. Based upon her knowledge of chemistry and environmental protection, she worried that the ecology of Xiamen would be directly impacted when hazardous chemical raw materials are produced in massive quantities in the Haicang district which is so close of the city center. Zhao, together with a number of scientists and professors, enumerated the possible safety consequences and pollution risks of the PX project. For example, the International practice is to place such a project 70 kilometers away from the cities, but the distance is 20 kilometers in China. Meantime, the Haicang-PX project is only 7 kilometers away from the city center, the closest instance in the world. The nearest residential area of 100,000 people besides the PX project were some 1,500 meters (one mile) away². As a result, they were trying to persuade the Xiamen and Fujian government to pay serious attention and relocated the project. But their concerns were always handled in a low-keyed manner and returned no result.

Debate over the plant began to grow during the Fifth Session of the Tenth the Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee (CPPCC) from March 3 to 15, 2007, when Zhao Yufen, also a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, had organized a petition in which six Chinese Academy of Sciences academicians (included Zhao) and 104 other CPPCC members argued against the 300-acre, 1.4 billion USD factory complex, supporting calls for the project to be halted. Zhao also raised the worry about the danger of an accident because such an eventuality was not without precedent (Tu C.H., 2007; Qu L.L., 2007). A petrochemical plant exploded in northern China's Jilin Province in November 13th, 2005, sending toxic chemicals into the Songhua River and fouling the water supply in the major city of Harbin (Wang J.Q., 2005; Liu M. and Ansfield J., 2005). Zhao also pressed her case with officials in Beijing. But the government, including the SDRC and the SEPA, had already approved the project, she was told, so there was nothing more to discuss.

At the same time, Xiamen authority was pushing hard to get the factory built. According to the report from *the Oriental Weekly*³, a Shanghai-based Xinhua newsweekly, officials in the Xiamen government was urged to "unity of thinking, disregard the objections from the CPPCC members and speed up the project" (Huang H., 2007) in March 18, five days after Professor Zhao Yufen had been interviewed for her petition in Beijing.

National Press Took Notice, SMS and Calls Circulated

After the "Two Congresses", reporters from national newspaper and magazines, such as

1 The "Two Congresses", most notably the two organizations which make national-level political decisions consists of meetings of China's legislature, the National People's Congress, and its advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

2 Interview, local resident in Haicang District, Xiamen, 2008. He described the construction site of the PX plant was as close as "visible to the naked eye" from his village where over 800 people lived.

3 The *Oriental Weekly of the Outlook* designs to operate relatively independently of the Xinhua News Agency.

China Youth Daily, *China Business Journal*, *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, *Oriental Weekly* and *Phoenix Weekly*¹, started to show up in Xiamen to interview Professor Zhao and paid a good deal of attention to the hazards. Local Xiamen media, on the other hand, ran no story about the PX project² (See Table 2).

TABLE 2

Reports on the controversial PX plant on selected national and Xiamen local newspaper, March to June 2007

	Before 28 May 2007		From 28 May 2007	
national-level press	China Youth Daily (15 March)			
	China Business Journal (19 March)			
		Oriental Weekly (26 May)		
				Hong Kong-based Phoenix Weekly (5 June)
				China Newsweek (11 June)
Others	Xiaoxiang Morning Herald (22 March)			
	Southern Metropolitan Daily (23 March)			
			Chongqing Morning Post (30 May)	
			Huaxi Metropolis Newspaper (30 May)	
local press			Xiamen Evening News (28 May)	
			Southeast Morning Post (29 May)	
			Xiamen Business News (29 May)	
			Xiamen Daily (30 May)	
			Southeast Express (31 May)	
			Strait Daily News (31 May)	Strait Herald (2 June)

Under this circumstance, however, some messages related to the PX project started to spread the alert via the mobile phones as SMS and callings, later the Internet, arguing it would be detrimental to the environment and public health.

One of the most renowned messages related the PX project to the chemical plant explosion in Jilin Province. All of the interviewees still can cite its contents:

“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

1 *China Business Journal* (中國經營報) is a weekly business newspaper run under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. *China Youth Daily* (中國青年報) is a daily newspaper published by Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China. *Oriental Weekly* (瞭望東方週刊) is less of a propaganda rag and more along the lines of China Newsweek or South Wind View with its fairly independent editorial office. *Phoenix Weekly* (鳳凰週刊) covers current affairs and cultural issues and is affiliated with the Phoenix television network founded by mainland-born media tycoon Liu Changle. *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (南方都市報), a daily newspaper distributed mainly in the Pearl River Delta area, is known for investigative journalism and provocative commentary. Its reporting on the Sun Zhigang beating case (which led to the repeal of the forced repatriation law) and the beginnings of SARS got several editors prosecuted for corruption on what were widely seen as trumped-up charges.

2 During our interviews, none of the interviewees got the information about the PX plant from local media as the first source.

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!" said one version of the text message, calling people to spread such information as soon as possible. These kinds of messages were communicating to an unprecedented degree to not only the people in Xiamen and their relatives, but also those who once lived or studied in Xiamen¹.

At the same time, that *"did you receive the SMS?"* became the opening remark when Xiamen citizens meet each other in the following three months². The SMS refers to the one about the PX project. There was a great stir among the citizens after these information spread. The common feeling was that the placement of the chemical industry in Xiamen is vitally connected to public interests, but why was this never disclosed? Actually in 2006 the documents from the State Council and SEPA, including *Decision on Implementing the Scientific Concept of Development and Stepping up Environmental Protection by the State Council* and *the Temporary Act of Environmental Impact Assessment of Public Participating*, specified that public consultations must be held in cases when a project will have an impact on the public's environmental interests. Little by little, the news broke through the blackout and had already been spread almost exclusively by mobile phone among the Xiamen public.

The sentiments of fear aroused by these information has affected the normal life of Xiamen citizen. Public opposition began to build through the Internet. At the popular Xiamen Internet communities such as Little Fish and the public BBS of Xiamen University, posts related to the PX project generally attracted tens of thousands of page views. The Internet has become the place where citizens express their voices. "Protect Xiamen" and "Give me back my blue sky" appeared frequently in the titles of Internet posts³.

As dissent grew, an environmental assessment was ordered to determine the effect that the chemical plant would have on the surrounding area. When the environmental report was made public in May 9, Xiamen Online launched a poll to measure the public's reaction to the study. The poll was closed the following day after 55,376 of 58,454 votes were cast against the project, meaning that opposing voices made up over 94% of those netizen who voted. The website said that it had neglected to screen for multiple votes cast from the same IP address, rendering the lopsided results invalid.

That result was fanning public anger this time and provoked heated protest against the PX plant by residents in Xiamen. Up until now, the press in Xiamen just involved in the report of PX plant, only having positive news about it and they just said it was "a great project". Meantime, *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 Xiamen⁴.

1 Interview, undergraduate and graduate students in Fuzhou, Guangzhou and Shanghai who once spent years study in Xiamen, 2007, 2009. Some of their schoolmates, who still used the Xiamen mobile phone number, also got those messages at that time, even they were already studying abroad.

2 Interview, residents in Xiamen, 2007. Also see Zhu H.J. (2007).

3 Interview, student in Xiamen University, 2007.

4 Interview, residents in Xiamen, 2007.

On May 28, *Xiamen Evening News* and *Xiamen Business News* published the same 10,000 word article in which the city environmental protection bureau director was interviewed. The report, titled *The Haicang PX project is under construction after being approved according to the legal state procedures*, was publicly regarded as the signal that the government is strongly pushing the project through¹ (*Xiamen Evening News*, 2007a; *Xiamen Business News*, 2007a; Zhu H.J., 2007). However, at the same time, the question being discussed in school, workplace and streets throughout the city is: What way forward to stop the project altogether? Again some text messages and calls began ricocheting around Xiamen and urging residents to join a street protest². It read:

“For the sake of our future generations, take actions! Participate among 10,000 people, June 1 at 8am, opposite the municipal government building! Hand ties yellow ribbons! Pass this message on to all your Xiamen friends!”

Taking note of this circumstance, the Fujian provincial party committee held an emergency meeting to discuss this topic. On the afternoon of May 29, a delay was agreed. That evening, the Xiamen city government was ready to call a press conference in Haicang district. But the press conference was finally changed to 8:50am on the morning of May 30 and the decision to “halt construction temporarily” pending further environmental review was announced. But the entire press conference took just a few minutes to complete. There were neither details about this environment impact assessment organization nor a timetable. Within the same page of *Xiamen Evening News*, there was also a report titled *The Haicang PX project have been approved by the national regulations on investment and management*³ (*Xiamen Evening News*, 2007b).

Meantime, the government asked the various departments to prepare to work to stabilize the masses. Local schools told students they would be expelled if they took to the streets. Students at school were confined to their dormitories.⁴

May 31, *Xiamen Daily* (2007) published an editorial stating that both the government and concerned citizens had Xiamen’s best interest at heart. But netizens continued to leave comments voicing their skepticism and anger. People complained that postponement was not the same as canceling, and voiced great suspicion that it was a delaying tactic, in the hopes that people would forget and move on.

“Walk” Continued, Mobile Phone-blogging Live Reporting

On 1st June, 2007, several hundred people took to the streets and staged a peaceful “walk” from 8am to 5pm, to signal their unhappiness with the government decision that they feared would ruin their health in the long run. Protesters gathered at the Xiamen municipal government buildings for several hours, holding up banners which included the words such as

1 Interview, residents in Xiamen, 2007.

2 Some reports said this message was definitely first sent on March 25. See Asia Sentinel (2007); also see Chua Chin Hon (2007).

3 Also see *Xiamen Business News* (2007b).

4 Interview. Student, journalist, civil servant and local residents, Xiamen, 2007 & 2008.

“resist PX, protect Egret Island” and “resist the PX project, protect city residents' health, protect Xiamen's environment”. Slogans of “stop construction, postponement is not enough” became a key demand on the demonstrations¹. People kept joining in along the way, more and more can be seen wearing yellow ribbons. Around half past 10 am, demands against PX were competing for airtime with more sensitive political slogans -- for the resignation of the city's party secretary². At the same time, police were just controlling traffic from a distance throughout the whole process.

As the march went on, many peoples, including passersby, pulled out their mobile phones and took pictures and video. Some of them immediately sent live updates from their mobiles phone straightly to their friends, the web page, blogs and video sites³. In addition, many video of the march has been uploaded to YouTube⁴. Bullog, one of the website with live reports, had already seen over 40,000 hits in just 4 hours during the demonstration.

When public feeling was aroused by the anti-PX walk, local newspaper kept on covering no news about the demonstration. Xiamen authorities accused the marchers of violating the law and on the following days branded the marchers as “individual lawbreakers” committed to a “highly inflammatory cause” in the local media (*Xiamen Daily*, 2007). But despite decreeing this to be an “illegal assembly” that was “seriously disrupting the public order”, the police obviously did not try to stop the demonstration.

Project Scrapped: An Emblematic Turnabout

Such concern from Xiamen's government, however, found no echo in Beijing this time. Pan Yue, deputy director of the SEPA, said his agency was doing a new environmental assessment of the entire city as Xiamen authorities had asked for in July 7. Pan “also hope the Xiamen government will make rational adjustments based on the environmental evaluation and try their best to adjust the current plan, which had residential areas in close proximity to the project” (*Xinhuanet*, 2007b). At the same time, *People's Daily* (2007), the Communist Party newspaper, ran a front-page editorial condemning local officials who had disregarded President Hu Jintao's admonitions to preserve the environment.

The turnabout had occurred. “The city government has listened to the opinions expressed and has decided, after careful deliberation, that the project must be re-evaluated.” Mayor Liu Cigui, speaking to reporters in Hong Kong the same day, agreed that the project might have to be shelved (Chen X.H., 2007). Meantime, the government's channel to communicate with the general public was open, including the local newspapers, broadcast on TV, the Internet, and in particular, mobile phone services, as convenient information platforms people can submit their advice or opinion to the government, while the government can collect, process and feedback these information in time. The text-messages sent in the following days said:

1 Interview. civil servant who works in the Xiamen municipal government building and local residents, Xiamen, 2007 & 2008.

2 Interview. local residents, Xiamen, 2008.

3 See, for example, Kennedy J. (2007).

4 See, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfzMg0x3KIk>, accessed 2 November 2008.

"The PX plant had already been halted and close. We are doing an environmental assessment and it takes more than half year. So if you have any ideas or suggestions, please go through the proper channels to give the government feedback. We will make sure to share your opinions and suggestions with the government."

On June 2, the information sent through mobile phone channels among local residents went like this:

"For two days, spontaneous parades have demonstrated our attitude. Production must continue, life must go on. There is no need to be impetuous and give unlawful elements eager for chaos an opportunity. Let us turn our eyes toward how the government handles the critical issue of the PX project."

A hearing in December 12 to 13 offered the public the chance to air their views on the PX plant, giving a chance to hear a more reliable selection of opinions on the project. Forty-five of forty-nine public representatives opposed the project, as did seven of the eight government representatives who had time to speak. The China Research Academy of Environmental Sciences noted that the decision ultimately rests with the city government, which has the power to designate the primary use of Haicang District on the city's master plan. After a series of public hearings and debates, the construction in the densely populated coastal city was put on in December 2007. A win-win situation had been achieved. The government has regained the people's support, and people have successfully safeguarded their rights.

MOBILE MEDIA AND MASS INCIDENTS IN RURAL CHINA

The mobile phone-mediated popular contentions not just occurred in urban areas. It also intensifies escalating clashes, associated rumors and devastating explosion in unexpected mass incidents in the countryside. In June 28, 2008, thousands of cell 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 allegation of a cover-up over a 16-year-old girl's "unusual death", according to reports (Xinhua, 2008a; Reuter, 2008; *Los Angeles Times*, 2008).

Weng'an town, a remote county in the mountains of Guizhou Province, is poor and per capita income among farmers -- who account for 90 percent of the county's 460,000 people -- is just 2,000 yuan (292.6 USD) a year (*Caijing*, 2008). The chaos started in Weng'an County on the afternoon of June 28 when people who were dissatisfied with the medicolegal expertise on the death of a local girl 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 with her classmates Wang Jiao and two younger men going out. 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. There were lots of versions, variations and recombination on Li's death out there after the police released the three suspects unconditionally the next day without any interrogation or statement-taking. Some said that Wang Jiao and the two young men, who have familial ties with the local public security bureau, were raped and killed Li and then tossed her body into the river afterward. A competitive alternative with the rape angle had these three students taking revenge because Li Shufen refused to pass tips to them during an exam. Li's family therefore went to petition at the country party committee office. After police refused, tension mounted. The rumor that the relatives were assaulted instead of getting justice then floated about¹. Some SMS 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."(Reuters, 2008)

This message drew the anger of the public and later sparked the conflicts. The death of the girl Li Shufen became intertwined with government officials, merciless policemen and injustice across the small county city. The rumors about the injustices rolled bigger and bigger, but these were clearly ignored by the government. At around 3pm on June 28, according to *Southern Weekend* (2008), two middle school students raised a banner saying "Justice for the people" in

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 provided firstly, he had not been beaten to death. Secondly, he was beaten by unidentified persons. See Rose Luqiu (2008); Also see *Guizhou Daily* (2008) and *Asian Weekly* (2008). Later it also proved that there is no possibility of secret help the three, who were found to be farmer children. See *China Daily* (2008).

front and several dozen followers marched on behalf of Li Shufen. But none of these marchers were family relatives of Li Shufen. With cell phone messages' mobilization, almost 10,000 people together and went to the public security bureau building where they smashed and burned all the police vehicles in front (Yu J.R., 2008a: 20-21). Blogs linked to the Sina.com Chinese website showed pictures of thousands of people surrounding a police headquarters, riot police guarding the burning shell of the building, and burnt and overturned police vehicles. *Ming Pao* (2008) reported that it seemed "the entire population of the county is outside the public security bureau office building".

The mass incidents in Weng'an, according to Shi Zhongyuan, the Guizhou provincial party secretary, appeared to have been triggered by the controversial death of a middle school female student, but the deep structural reason is that there had been frequent infringements of citizen rights over the relocation of migrants, demolition of buildings and mining rights disputes. In fact, Weng'an county has always had tense relations between cadres and citizens, police and citizens (*Outlook Weekly*, 2008). Shi admitted Weng'an county has repeatedly had violent incidents of robbery, murder, rape which have gone unsolved. The people who live here lack a sense of security. The failures of the county public security ministry have made everyone in the local community angry. As a result, Shi attributed the riots to "rude and roughshod solutions" by local authorities to solve disputes over mines, the demolition of homes for public projects, the relocation of residents for reservoir construction and other issues in July 3 (*South Weekend*, 2008). He also blamed local authorities for long-standing disregard for rampant crime in the county and incompetence in maintaining public security and urged Weng'an officials to make the people's rights and interests their first priority and to deal with public grievances. During his visit in Weng'an, Shi Zhongyuan admonished himself more than once: "Weng'an is unsafe. The people dare not tell the truth. That is our responsibility ... the government is unable to stop the bad people and the masses are suffering. Weng'an is unsafe. The good people cannot defeat the bad people." (*Southern Weekend*, 2008) He apologized repeatedly to the people of Weng'an and even gave himself a mark of 50 points out of 100 -- below standard after handling the Weng'an case (*Caijing*, 2008; *Outlook Weekly*, 2008; Hu S.L., 2009).

If we run back over the past, there is another precedent for such a small criminal case trigger such a large-scale mass incident with the help of mobile phone. Demonstrations by students and local residents of in Rui'an city in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province erupted in September 11, 2006 in the square in front of the city government compound, in protest against alleged police mishandling of the death of a 30-year-old high school teacher, Dai Haijing, falsifying a report and colluding with her husband to have her death classified as a suicide. Mobilized by cell phone's messages and the Internet, several thousand students marched in the streets slowly to demonstrate, which caused great unease at the Rui'an municipal government (*Wenzhou Metropolitan Daily*, 2006; *South China Morning Post*, 2006; Yu J.R., 2008b: 6). After the people started a petition signature drive and assembled to demand the government re-open the investigation, the authorities sent out a large number of armed police and there was

a clash. As many people were arrested and injured, this led to even greater civilian anger. In 7 September several thousand people assembled in front of the city government building to march and petition. Some people put up banners about business-government collusion that ignore the life of a citizen. Up to 10,000 protesters later ransacked the factory of Dai's husband and overturned several vehicles parked outside. The riot, which the official Xinhua news agency said (2008a), injured 50 police officers and protesters, coincided with a community protest march at last.

DISCUSSIONS AND FINDING

By multiply disturbances cases between the organized elite field and the unorganized bottom field, these popular contentions marked not only the emergence of the groundbreaking protest movements, but also a significant increase in the public recognition of mobile phone as a legitimate news sources and weapon with strong mobilization capacity. The anti-PX Walk could be the first case of a mobile phone-mediated protest in the urban areas, not to mention a successful intervention into the government's plans. Mobile phone stood out as the most notable medium instigating massive protests and riots in Rui'an and Weng'an. Grassroots mobilization makes the mechanism of interest expression of the peasants' group manifest flexibility on the methods of interest expression, dualism on the organization, ambiguousness to the political indirection. Grassroots mobilization is also both the process of mobilizing participation, and the process of reasonably controlling and stopping the collective actions in good time. Whether the movements in Xiamen or Weng'an subsides or flares up again remains to be seen, but the mobile phone-enhanced popular contentions themselves are of enormous significance for all those fighting environmental destruction or social justice, and for democratic rights and political participation in China.

China's Traditional Media Landscape in 21st Century

The traditional and mainstream media and the Post-SARS Communication Order

Many studies focuses on the censorship in China's state-led media and its statue quo, meaning that the press, television, radio, and other traditional media are controlled through a combination of laws, propaganda departments, self-censorship by editors, and internalized rules about what is and is not an acceptable topic for reporting in China (see, for example, Ickovic C. et al., 2006). But following the increasing commercialization of the Chinese media since the 1990s, absolute media controls have seemingly given way to economic policies seeking to stimulate market competition and journalists have been redefining their roles from being Party propagandists to being information providers (Pan Z. & Lu Y., 2003; Pan Z. & Chan J.M., 2003). These changes in the media sector have resulted in the processes of de-centralization of media governance, specialization of media contents, and multiplication of media production and distribution (Lee C.C., 2002:13; Zhao Y.Z., 1998). Under the circumstance, China's media market, although structurally embedded in the state's policy, carves potentially newer space of public expression both from journalists and the ordinary. Another momentous transformation starts in 2003 when the SARS situation brought about the government to recognize the need for more media transparency in situation of disaster and disease. Then the government legalized the reporting of death tolls from natural disasters in 2005 (*People's Daily*, 2005). The State Council, China's cabinet, announced on 24 April, 2007

the long-awaited administrative regulation named “The Decree of Government Information Openness”¹, which took effect since 1 May 2008, empowering citizens to access to government information and explicitly requires government departments to be more open in information disclosures to boost official transparency. Meantime, the Chinese government is also allowing mass media to report on protests and unrest in the hope it can cover “more original, timely and popular stories” and to enhance their domestic and international influence since 2008 (Branigan T., 2008). It means the central government has made sure that it's almost impossible to block anything nowadays when information can spread very quickly on the Internet and mobile media. The only way to manage the impact of bad news is to report the news first. National news agency, newspapers and radio stations have become more daring in their choice of topic and way of presentation. In this regard, the characteristic of communication order after SARS can be seen as the transformation in establishing a new regime of citizen's right of access to government information, given the obstinate culture of secrecy in this ancient country and the persisting behavioral pattern of the bureaucracy in concealing any information that may embarrass the government.

The central government, for instance, did many things right in response to the Weng'an riots. Beijing's campaign to treat “sudden incidents” with more openness was obvious. A full news conference revealing the government's version less than two days after the riot is pretty unheard of by Chinese standards. Reporters from around the country and world flooded into Guizhou without limitation (Buxi, 2008). Senior provincial leaders were also sent to Weng'an to provide high-level attention; Shi Zongyuan, the Party chief for Guizhou province, was on the scene leading that first investigation team within two days.

The local media's performance in Xiamen's anti-PX demonstration, however, seems to be an exception. Local Xiamen media, such as *Xiamen Daily* and *Xiamen Evening News*, had been so quiet until May 28, failing to meet local people's information requirements on the PX project. Neither did they say anything about the demonstrations in June 1st. Furthermore, lots of national newspaper and magazines had already paid a good deal of attention to the plant, as well as the demonstrations².

Why has Xiamen media so quite, or been the inverse approach against the national ones? When we talk about the local media, they suffered much more controls from local propaganda department rather than the central one. Different from Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, whose scope is to give general instructions to the media on what is and what is not to be said about certain “delicate” issues, like Taiwan, Tibet, those can affect state security, local propaganda department has a “direct leadership” role in the local media control system. The local government will attract the national media's attention and the central government's awareness if local news outlets have been dominated by the harsh stories of negative events.

1 See Xinhuanet (2008).

2 See, for example, China Newsweek (2007).

Another example is that when Wang Weibo, a reporter from the *China Newsweek*, went to Weng'an to investigate, he found that if the reporter does not register with the local authorities, he does not get cooperation; the family members of the deceased are provided "full company" by local officials during interviews; the "bulletins" provided to the reporter are deliberately filtered; more than a dozen local teachers have been organized to comment and guide opinion on the Internet (Ma J., 2008).

The picture as a result is more complicated at the local media level when the local propaganda department plays a key role in local protectionism in media coverage and decision-making procedures, reflecting complex adaptive systems that excise autopoietic functions with the involvement of different stakeholders. Editors at local media organizations under the direct responsibility of the local party's propaganda department will always receive close guidance on how to explain the government's policy response to local citizen, its targeted readership, as well as the requirement of speaking along the same lines as local government and the propaganda department did. Therefore local media must tread carefully, especially if their work negatively affects the bottom line of provincial czars, local party and government officials. National press, on the other hand, were less subject to pressure from the local Propaganda Department than their colleagues at local newspapers and television stations, who risked losing their salaries and other benefits if they defied orders from the censors. The national media outlets constitute more autonomy from the local ones and thus serve as more effective channels for participation and representation in some controversial topics and events.

Our sense remains that traditional journalism is not, as some suggest, becoming irrelevant. Because we can see the Xiamen PX plant not only met considerable public opposition, but also had been covered at the very beginning by several national media, helping to spread an increasingly major concern especially to the higher authorities. All these reports now seem to be the foundations for local Xiamen people's protest. "It shows that the central government doesn't prohibit to question the PX incident." explains a provincial-level editor¹. These stirrings at the top, within the ruling party, undoubtedly encouraged the protest movement over the controversial plant from below, calling for taking public opinions seriously.

As a result, the current real problem is that some parts of the local Chinese bureaucracy have become so used to cover up problems under their jurisdiction that they are waking up too slowly to the damage lapses to do their reputation at home and abroad. That's why Premier emphasized that to ensure information transparency it is key to make the government affairs public and government must do its job transparently and under the sunlight with heads of American Chinese media on September 24, 2008. Except responsibility, service, dedication and honesty, a government should enjoy no any other privilege (Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco, 2008). And according to Wen, the openness of government affairs should be institutionalized and improved in the process of practice. Compared with the official media outlets at the national level enjoying a relatively more relaxed political

1 Interview. Editor from provincial-level newspaper, Fujian, 2008.

environment, the institutional and structural nature of local media, combined with the reporting system from the influences of commercialism and the strong local social network, inhibit them from developing into an arena for critical debate.

The Internet: Commercialization and Government Controlled

Internet has been popular for more than twenty years in China. During all these years, people have been expecting the Internet to work as a public sphere in terms of the distinguished technological traits. Taking the low access threshold and unlimited capacity for every kind of speech to focus, Internet performances indeed reflect a well-constructed framework for fulfilling what Habermas described as public sphere. But the road to the Internet's utopia in China is likely to be bumpy, as we mentioned before, undeniably the Chinese government had acted as a vital driving force for boosting Internet diffusion and online democratic expressions, such as China Premier Wen Jiabao's Internet debut in February 2009 (Yang, D.L., 2001; Zhong Y.M., 2002; Xinhua, 2009).

It reminds us again the intrinsic problems of Internet media. Internet media have always under controls by technological competence from the government because the access to this technology is primarily available through Chinese networks and service provider. No other information about the anti-PX demonstration, especially the video and photos, can be found online from the evening of June 1st, suggesting that authorities had removed references from bulletin boards or website. "Key words like 'benze', 'demonstration', 'atomic' and 'leukaemis' were also jammed by the government's sophisticated technology." explained one webmaster¹.

Another webmaster once topped all the topics about the anti-PX march on the forum which he is in charge with, and tried to provide a comprehensive platform about the event to other netizen. But later he found that all the topics and postings had vanished. "Only the senior webmasters from BAIDU can deleted those topics," said he, in the affirmative.

Much the same thing happened in the Weng'an mass incident. 15 out of the 20 posts in the Tianya Miscellaneous Chat page are related to the Weng'an mass incident at 17:03 on June 29. But the major portals were deleting the related posts as quickly as possible.

Most importantly, we can see the local government started to engage in some "virtual battle" via Internet media with some new strategies. In Weng'an case, according to *Youth Weekend's* report, 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 small band of rowdies, calm people down with comments on the Internet, and even "use the Guizhou media to affect national opinion" (Ma J., 2008: A12).

The worst-case scenario starts when the local authorities have fine-tuned the censorship system to keep up with these changes. When the authorities are struggling to supervise such online lawlessness, Xiamen government planed to propose a regulation barring anonymous

1 Interview. An webmaster of Baidu Tieba, 2008.

postings online and requiring Web sites to approve all postings. “Following the opposition to the PX project, the government felt it should exert some control over Internet content,” said Tian Feng, the vice director of the Xiamen Municipal Industry and Commerce Bureau (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2007). Even there is no relation between the chemical plant and the regulation, according to vice propaganda chief of the Xiamen Communist Party committee, “those people who stirred the anti-PX demonstration in the Internet in the last few days should be punished according to the regulations from the real name online registration” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2007).

When China netizen actively use the Internet to sway opinions and put across actions and ideas, the Internet climate changes abruptly in contemporary China, and maybe in the future. Besides a growing ability of Internet surfers to exert influence on mainstream public opinion, in Xiamen case we can see that this digital technology has been exhausted in sending public opinions to the government. Also we can see that the local government started to initiate public opinion wars through the low-cost and highly efficient information platform in Weng’an and Rui’an cases. This netizen groups who always voicing only on the Internet have come to realize that public opinions expressed online have their own logic, rules and limitations. When a public opinion war escalates and turns nasty only in the Internet, things take a different twist. We can see that in particular some entrepreneurs, such as Sanlu, began to choose the Internet media on their own initiative to express ideas, make clarifications, manage a crisis or make up an excuse. Undercover commercial company has been trained to infiltrate online chat rooms and online BBS, or even online survey, in order to put forward the government position on topics arising in discussions. The advantages from the government also made it much easier to control the voice from people, and therefore the public sphere from the Internet, particularly in the face of the government and some business elites, is invalid.

The unprecedented engagement to express the government or merchant princes’ opinions in the websites has prohibited individuals from engaging in “rational and critical public discussions that formed the basis for a ‘public opinion’,” which is the essence of the public sphere (Habermas, J., 1991: 318-404). Turing the cyberspace into some kind of ideological tabloid decreases the authority and credibility of the Internet, often discouraging existing netizen from participating in discussion again. That’s why Internet media in China become more frequently embroiled in complicated conflict of interest situations. With the invisible and omnipresent hand from the government or on the Internet getting stronger, there must be some supervisory input from ordinary people to stop the deterioration of a competitive situation into one of online abuse, and to prevent underworld-style behavior.

What’s the functions of Mobile Media

Should the masses in Xiamen win the struggle it sets an important precedent of public participation in China compelling a change of policy by local government. When in Rui’an and Weng’an mass incidents, peasants without access to the sophisticated techniques, such as the

Internet, can fight back with the support of mobile phones. More importantly, these events, relying on public participation, established a new type of activism, which focused on a single issue in order to change governmental habits and the law. The powers of mobile phone in the popular contention cases perform the following four tasks.

Firstly, cell phone technology is poised to breach of information blockade and reshape the people's views and knowledge against the silence from local government and media. The capacity for citizens "to communicate with each other" and "to gain access to information they need", as Calhoun, C. (2005) points out, "...both are crucial to enabling citizens to make democratic choices". In anti-PX protests, it wasn't until the PX issue was picked up by alarmed Xiamen mobile phone users that it exploded into real public view. Within hours, the message made its way to the Internet, while millions of SMS messages were circulated even more widely and quickly via cell phones as part of the mass campaign against the plant, according to Xinhua's report (Xinhua, 2007). Mobile phone made sure that even the carriers without access to the Internet can be warned about the negative effect from the PX plant. The "no violence" appeals on Xiamen's demonstrations, for instance, needed to be built upon. When most of the police and soldiers were just surrounding people, not blocking them during the demonstration process, some police were even telling people during the march to make a racket if they choose, and it's working¹. "Every people have knew it very well already via mobile messages' alert that they, and their children, will also suffer if the PX project goes ahead."² Thanks to this new wireless communication technology, nobody felt that they can avoid the effects on water, air, soil and public awareness was growing that this is everybody's concern, not someone else's. Also without a doubt the Internet can't be a solution for rural inhabitants in poverty-stricken countryside such as Weng'an town. In remote rural cases, mobile phone served as a gateway to accept and transmit data to and from the ordinary people against the obstinately opinionated government and silent local media. It shows that the rights to the free flow of information -- to access significant information people need -- is as important as the rights to demonstrate -- to express the public opinion -- and the PX issue itself.

Especially when government tries to control the information via mobile phone, the restrictions have been unsuccessful largely because both officials and ordinary people require cell phones in order to conduct daily business with each other. The mobile phone-based information flow has thereby found way around censors to provide the pluralistic, alternatively much differentiated information to users, created a "space" of communication transcending any particular place and weaving together conversations involving people who are strangers to each other, and constrained governments' agenda to some extent, implying that "power is more distributed and networks tend to undercut the monopoly of traditional bureaucracy" (Nye J.S., 1999).

The dispersal of rumors co-occurs with in the process of information dissemination via

1 Interview, local resident, Xiamen, 2008.

2 Interview, local residents, Xiamen, 2007, 2008.

mobile phone. The rumor was without foundation. But when public information lags in the slightest, it can leave room for rumors to be broadcast even the origin of the messages was unclear. Without a free press that enjoys public credibility, ordinary people distrust the government but believe rumors (Pei, X.M., 2008). Of critical importance, mobile phones base their appeal less on how they cover the news and more on what they cover and who they send to. Under this circumstance, “swarms are characterized by the absence of imposed centralized control, autonomous subunits with high connectivity and peer influence” (Rheingold H., 2002: 178).

In anti-PX case, the disastrous consequences of the benzene factory explosion at the Jilin chemical plant in 2005 made people become more sensitive to pollution complaints after accidents that contaminated rivers, disrupting water supplies to major cities. A widely circulated message then likened the PX facility to the same factory as that one in Jilin, and even “*an atomic bomb*” in Xiamen. The SMS warned, in emotive language, that

“The new petrochemical plant being built in the Haichang district, ...would produce pollutants that would lead to higher rates of leukaemia and foetal abnormalities.”

Some allegations via cell phones built up a connection between PX and the cancer. At the same time, even Professor Zhao Yufen’s proposal information had been exaggerated to

“International safety standards say such production must be located 100 kilometers from any residential area”.

And at a time when SMS messages are flying all over the place, Prof. Zhao had to decline all interviews: “It is not appropriate to be interviewed because the academic debate has risen to a non-academic level” (*Southern Weekend*, 2007), pointing to the fact that the scientists can not help to talk the local people out of being affected with panic from the PX project without the clarification from the government. As no one could be sure if the whole affair was just a prank, the message nonetheless succeeded in stoking an all-time high environmental awareness and unprecedented public opposition to the petrochemical plant with their florid languages. Such kind of fear-appeal information, together with the proximity and mobile phone-based reliable relations to the users, stirred the PX-phobia among people, leading to great antipathy no matter it had already been approved by the central government and passed the environment assessment.

In Weng’an case, there are various civilian versions about the death of Li Shufen. But none of these are backed up by accurate information. In particular, when the family of Li went to the police station to talk to the three principals, the latter were no longer there and began to appear in the rumors:

“The principal murderer is the niece of the county party secretary, and the other two men are relatives of the police station chief. The deceased had been raped and killed.”

Another version said “*the uncle of the female student was alleged to have been beaten by the police and later died at the hospital.*”

Later the increasingly distorted rumors via text-messages and calls began to spread through

the streets of Weng'an.

"16-year-old Li Shufen was murdered because she refused to let a female classmate copy her answers during an exam; her throat had many wound marks -- she was obviously strangled to death!; the son of the Weng'an county deputy mayor with another young man raped a Weng'an County No. 3 Middle School female student, killed her and tossed her body into the Simen river ..." (Southern Weekend, 2008)

At the same time, local residents already have a pre-existing credibility issue with the local governments as the accumulation of many mundane issues in daily life over time (*Outlook Weekly*, 2008). When rumors raised much conjecture, they believed anything bad even whatever they heard because this re-affirms the fact that the local governments are bad. These people hold such attitudes out of a strong sense of justice and sympathy. That was how the mass incident got started. And the mistrust between government and the governed became apparent and reveals problems for the future of governance.

Second, the capacity of organization via mobile phone is key to the success of protest movements, preventing the possibility to stop the mobilized information proliferation. They showed how quickly a movement can flare up and even in the complete absence of legal organizations or democratic means for mobilizing, such as meetings, leaflets, and posters. Also they showed the protest movements are finding a quick way around these controls from internet police and spy software, or any other obstacles, despite warnings from local government and public security bureau. Public opinion articulated in mobile phone-mediated popular contentions is not merely a virtual venting but profoundly a positive involvement in public affairs in an opener and freer public domain that is less constrained by officially sanctioned agendas, editorial polices in traditional media, or censorship and refined control on the Internet. That's why mobile phone-enhanced public opinion mediated in popular contentions is particularly significant for the ordinary.

In Xiamen case, the demonstrators came mostly from China's fast-growing middle-class residing in major cities, a group usually regarded as a dependable bulwark for support. Why? "The people initially wanted to show their opinions on this important environmental issue, but we found our right to show our opinions is stopped or cheated." One explains¹. Then Xiamen's citizens were not satisfied by the city government's offer of a six-month "review" process, temporarily postponing the PX project, and began demanding their rights. What is needed now is to spread this organization as widely as possible in order to make it much harder for the government to crush it. Despite efforts by local telecommunication technicians to block the cellphone campaign, thousands of people heeded the alarm during the last days of May. The mobile phone campaign, rely more on people to be an independent decision-maker, picked up momentum when residents of Xiamen were quick to mobilize a peaceful rallies that caught the attention of bloggers nationwide and helped push the government to pressure the city to give up on its plans for the factory. As a result, Premier Wen Jiabao (*China Business Feature*, 2009)

1 Interview, local residents, Xiamen, 2007 & 2008.

stated after the Xiamen PX event that "...if the people of Xiamen failed to find a way to express their ideas or even after their ideas are clearly expressed, and the administrations turn a deaf ear to them, the result will be disastrous."

Of the last importance, gimmicks, warnings and the last-minute retreat by local government -- with the obvious aim of derailing Friday's protest march failed to stop the gather storm of mobile phone-mediated local people. The anti-PX protest marchers went ahead as scheduled, ignoring announcements by the authorities -- including a last-ditch effort to stave off the protest on May 30 from a press conference to announce the suspension of the PX project and one made while the demonstrations were in the street -- that the factory project was on hold. "It's the anti-PX walk in June that stopped the government's plant, and it is the only way to solve problems like ours" is a consensus among not only the Xiamen people, but also people outside Xiamen¹.

Conditions happened practically in rural protests. At Rui'an No.3 Junior High School, students had been order to attend classes on Sunday, an apparent attempt to block further protests but failed because text messages and calls allowed local residents to pull young people out of school and into the street (*Wenzhou Metropolitan Daily*, 2006; AP, 2006). In Weng'an County, the incident began with students demonstrators (*Oriental Weekly*, 2009). Then thousands of local people who did not know about the exact context of what had happened were instigated by mobile phone to mob the police station and the office buildings of the county government and Communist Party committee. But the party, government and public security bureau had no information beforehand and were not mentally prepared. When the incident took place, they had no contingency plan and any response. Because the way the movements had grown in so short a time, Weng'an mass incident is not just an impressive example of rights activism.

We can see from the cases that besides the possibility of the free flow of information and viewpoints, mobile phone functions in a sense like neighborhood salons that help aggregate individual preferences into a collective choice. Acting as an extension of the range of individual communication, the public participation in the decision-making process that is facilitated via mobile phone has on one hand effectively widen the channels for influencing the government, whether local and central, to gather public opinion when initiating public policies, on the other hand, encouraged and protected those haven't right.

In the historical reevaluation of the bourgeois public sphere, Fraser N. (1990: 67) argues that rather than opening up the political realm to everyone, the bourgeois public sphere shifted political power from "a repressive mode of domination to a hegemonic one" ruled by the majority ideology instead of power. To deal with this hegemonic domination, she argues that repressed groups form "Subaltern counter-publics" or "Counterpublics" -- marginalized groups' own public spheres -- that are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations

1 Interview, local residents, Xiamen, 2007, 2008.

of their identities, interests, and needs"(Fraser N., 1990: 67). Beyond the question of individual identity formation and the free flow of information, mobile phone as a medium affords a useful model to understand how the mobile communications is driving the next social revolution -- transforming the ways in which Chinese mobile citizens meet, work, study, organize and protest in China. With a participatory ethos, mobile media in both rural and urban areas struggles for economic survival, social justice and legality, and seeks to build an inexpensive virtual counter-public sphere (Downey, J., & Fenton, N., 2003), which invents and circulates discourses as opposed to those featured in the mainstream, making the predominant public sphere more inclusive and open to ordinary people. The practice of the counter-public sphere from mobile phone therefore centers on both the idea of participatory democracy, and how public opinion becomes political action. This also means the central government should take extremely serious to the public opinions through the mobile phone.

The Chinese political system is in transition under the influences of economic development, new generations of leaders, the reform and opening up of the country to the outside world, and increasing pluralism of sources of information. There has been a new turn now in the debates over the media, democracy and public sphere as the control over regime for mobile phone in China is still in its initial phase (Lynch D.M., 2000). Acknowledging the structural conditions is critical because it alerts us to a series of concrete scenarios in which mobile phone can be used to strengthen social control for the purpose of pre-empting risk and guarding against some "manipulators" to control public opinion via online communications.

Third, the fast-speed decentralization of mobile phone-featured information dissemination protects the organizers from detaining or jailing. In the mobile phone-mediated popular contentions, every person has the possibility to be an organizer once he forwards the information to one person or more. As a result, it became hardly to capture the key person in the demonstrations. In Xiamen's anti-PX demonstration, each interviewee admitted that they had received one or more mobilized information calling for a "walk" against the government's decision. Lots for the SMS came from anonymous or strange cellphone number. At this stage the Chinese government and their citizen everywhere have been deluged with SMS protests demanding the relocation of the project and showing support for the Xiamen struggle. The efficient information dissemination with a decentralized architecture from mobile phone also helps to protect the organizers of popular contentions from being co-opted, bought off, detained or jailed by the government more available (Li L.J. & O'Brien K.J., 2008; Cai Y.S., 2008). In another word, each people who forward the mobilized calling information actually act as a role to support the organization of demonstration, and that is hardly to control or trace the way these information came.

And finally, Calls, photos, audio and video from multi-function mobile phone air the information about the demonstrations to the world, bringing inevitable and irresistible attention from the central government and oversea media, and then give the demonstrators a power even they had not envisioned. The interactions between ordinary people appear at first glance only

to affirm seemingly positive and effective public communication. However, given that the public opinion discoursed, debates and demonstrations in cell phone and cyberspace has a far-reaching impact on the government in connection with its roles, institutions and bureaucracies in the information age. What should not be simply underestimated in particular is that underpinning these circle and encouraging people is the cell phone-enable real-time reporting. How do those photos and video come about from a suddenly breaking incident? With the easy availability of mobile phone, including mobile camphone, in rural and urban areas people no longer have to depend on cumbersome and eye-catching DC, DV and computer to capture their struggles in video, on camera and send messages back to their friends. These live reporting gave it a national and international exclusive as to what was happening minute-by-minute down on the ground. Therefore government and journalism are becoming a small part of people's information mix. The press is no longer gatekeeper over what the public knows. That power is moving to those who make news away from those who cover it. And 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, BBS posting, and on blogs, making it an international-observed mass demonstration. Pressures were bearing down on the local government when live-photo and real time-video had been uploaded to the Internet or circulated among mobile users, traveling to a larger audience or group. Considering that there had already been citizen journalism via cell phones help enhance the news on the story, and press from oversea media, such as AP, Reuters and *Financial Times*, had already taken note of the issue, any crackdown to prevent the protest would probably have simply made the situation worse, or perhaps even sparked a violent conflict. The longer the protests continue, the more politicized they will become. In this sense, the government must have gradually take public opinion more into consideration when initiating and implementing public policies. The government and its journalistic following, as a result, need to learn quickly how to help shape the new regulatory direction, how to help educate government officials about which rules will work and which will not based upon the new era of information distribution.

As it has been widely perceived in China's society, mobile phones -- the increasingly drive force of changes -- represent a more serious and effective form of struggle. Under the cardinal guidelines of Chinese political correctness, the Chinese public, in particular those rural inhabitants, are often perceived as unlikely to form any independent opinions over political expression, and thus extremely difficult to make any significant impact upon public polices. Except responsibility, service, dedication and honesty, a government should enjoy no any other privilege as Premier Wen Jiabao stated (Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco, 2008). And public participation means breaking the government's monopoly on power and the public should not be left out of the decision-making process. Thanks to the introduction of wireless telephony handset -- mobile phone, things have already been changing because of rising public opinion and mobile phone-enhanced public participation. All this is based on using cellphone's most basic and inexpensive features: voice, short message and

MMS. These social movements have firmly entered Chinese folklore as proofs that determined citizens acting en masse can force the authorities to reverse course and address their need. It is China's mobile civil society that is leading the charge. The lessons, say people involved in the deal, have been seared into citizens' brains, and have been evident in the other social movements in China.

CONCLUSION

Instead of focusing on the macro, exceptional or exterior features of mobile phone which has framed much of the academic and media discussions about ICTs in China and the world, my primary concern is the broad development path of public sphere in China and political processes that have underpinned this democratic process with the help of mobile media. Based on the popular contention cases organized by mobile phone in rural and urban areas, this study highlights a growing problem for China's government in a country with the world's largest, over 641 million mobile phone users.

Technologically and functionally, mobile phone was born and developed around the core issue of how to communicate with each other and spread information more quickly. The development of China's "multi-centric" telecommunications network, according to Lynch D.M. (2000: 182), is shattering this decades-old (even centuries-old) pattern of local isolation and establishing conditions for the development of cross-hatching "social xitong (system)" linking individuals, organizations, and groups throughout the country with each other and with people abroad. Spread via cell phones as a personal approach with proximity and higher credibility, directives and rumors from mobile media, even the messages having no clear organizational identity, helped draw thousands of people together for a public demonstration or mass riot, creating a cascading effect that inflames public passions and make waves in China's society. These events, by no means isolated, mean that mobile participation is not generated by institutions but based on personal motivation via cell phone.

At the same time, telecommunications fall outside of the mass media-centered model. With low-cost, handy phones gain popularity, there are now new competing models of citizen journalism, with more outlets delivering news. Citizen journalists carrying camphones sent messages, pictures and video about the action to bloggers and posted real-time reports in Xiamen's rally and Weng'an riot for the world to see. News will continue to struggle to be the primary public square where people gather with the central newsrooms in a community delivering that audience across different platforms. The paradox of professionalizing the new medium to preserve its integrity as an independent citizen platform is the start of a complicated new era in the evolution of mobile media creating sphere.

Mobile Citizen and Counter-Public Sphere

People want technology that is easy to use and serves a definite purpose. With farmers accounting for nearly 57 percent of the population, the Digital Divide issue had become a priority obstacle to the goal of participatory communications and public sphere. Many critics say that development agencies have focused too much on the information aspect of technology rather than the communication aspect. That's not to say technology isn't the answer.

Technology may be part of the answer -- and not a very big part, just as that the technical features of mobile phone do not automatically promote democracy and public service. Other factors play a big role such as education and an understanding that the new technology will provider democracy.

Communication in modern democracies can be broadly divided into two main notions: a democratized media, or participatory and alternative media including computer-mediated communication; and social movements and groups using these media actively for social change (Dahlgren P., 1995). Starting in 2003 and accelerating in 2007, there have begun to be questions not only from mass media but now from new digital media about whether the dominant model of media ownership, the public corporation, is still preferred. As communication technology -- led primarily by the spread of mobile phone -- seeps deeper into China's society, an information-technology sphere is starting to emerge. In many of China's recent social movements in the countryside, words started to spread fast among organizers and protestors by ways of calls and SMS-messages. Of critical importance, mobile phone's mobilization blurs the boundary between the public and the private. Details vary from incident to incident, but the incidents share a common foundation of mobile media as non-mainstream, grassroots efforts to serve the social, cultural and political needs of small communities, including well-educated middle-class and illiterate or semi-literate peasants, who have been excluded or marginalized in the mass-media public sphere. For the ordinary citizen, recent events show that they need to come forward to solve their own problems. Telephony is redefining the role of the citizen and endowing the individual with more responsibility and command over how he/she consumes information.

Social events educated the public and also sent signals to government administrations and the government. For the government, its competence and decisions are now being questioned by a population that has more channel of communication than ever. This also means all the old methods used to monitor public opinion, not only the traditional media but also the Internet, are losing relevance.

Mobile Media: A Civilian Information-Technology Springboard for Public Service

In the case of China, mobile telephony toward potential public opinion indeed sheds lights on further enquiry into whether cell phone-mediated counter-public sphere could possible influence the trajectory of future China's political socioeconomic development. Using the mobile media as an information source will increase the magnitude of social participation on local issues between groups higher and lower in education. In another word, mobile media serves as an integrating force increasing the attitudes toward public involvement and linking new generation to the large social system and outside world. Over the past six years, the decentralization of media control (brought on by the growing power and usage of the mobile media) and the virus-like communication effects of mobile phone have broadened the vision of both the social elites and ordinary people. A unique democratic paradigm is increasingly

characterized by the widespread application of advanced ICTs in present-day's democratic theory and practice. "Strong democracy", a new form of participatory politics for a new age, as Barber B.R. (1984: 261) proposes, requires unmediated self-government by an engaged citizenry and institutions that will involve individuals at both the neighborhood and the national level in common talk, common decision-making and political judgment, and common action. As we see in these cases, the idea of the mobile phone-mediated counter-public sphere can enhance, in Barber's thought, "direct" public participation and citizen-powered decision-making process (Barber B.R., 1984: 583). Mobile democratic practice involves cellphone users participating in rational and critical deliberation and consultation, hence uniting the people to form the resultant force, no longer the individual or virtual expression online and reviving the heated discussions about "counter-public sphere" in reality. In this regard, the mobile phone-enhanced democratic revival could foster the democratic potential to become a more open and deliberative platform particularly for periphery groups or politics indifference to engage in public discourse that of traditional media like newspaper and TV, as well as the Internet.

According to *Outlook Weekly* (2009a; 2009b; 2009c), the fact remains China is far from stable in 2009 because jobless urbanites jumped to more than 8 million, fresh university graduates are bound to face a hard time securing jobs, with some 7.1 million entering the job market this year, and more than 10 million migrant workers lost their job as worsening global financial crisis takes its toll on the country's export-led economy. This study focuses on the power of communication technology to transmit messages as an independent citizen platform, and the possibility for China's subaltern social class not just of altering identities but of planning actions or engaging in government's public service. While the potential for people-to-people exchanges may insidiously change mutual perceptions among the users, there are currently less structural avenues for these mobile communities to percolate upwards to intervene in the political processes today in China. People want to participate but they are coming up against systematic obstruction in the past. Now a series of unprecedented victory in Xiamen or Weng'an, however, mean that the public is no longer helpless because they are empowered to take part in the governance with the help from modern wireless telecommunication. Campaigns such as "Ask the Premier", jointly launched by Xinhuanet.com and China Mobile for their 100 million plus mobile phone users, had collected over 250,000 short messages, a substantial portion of which were from blue-collars, farmers, and students in the "Two Congress" since 2008. While delivering a keynote report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) last October, Chinese President Hu Jintao also stressed the necessity to "expand orderly participation in politics through every level and in every field." (Xinhua, 2008b) The role of mobile media to foster social interconnectivity and make citizen an independent decision-maker in the construction of Chinese political subjectivity therefore can be viewed structurally as the diminution of the effects of the

established vertical model¹ of ideological communication and political control through the introduction of more interpersonal, horizontal possibilities. The power of mobile phone will only get stronger with the development of the economy, ICTs and civil society. The political significance of mobile media therefore should not be underestimated in the context of contemporary China's political environment when various social forces are communicating their struggles with the aid of this technique, posing challenges in governance and forcing the authorities to engage with new kinds of practices. These processes -- within the counter-public sphere and political space -- de-balance China's conventional national public spheres, because on the individual level they shape political identities, notions of citizenship, between the 'global' and the 'local', the public and the private, social concerns and individual passion. No one doubts the enormity of the information dissemination capacity of mobile media. As the power of mobilization, democratic expression or political participation spread through multi-function mobile media and their networks can never be "blocked", the Chinese government must figure out how to improve the effective and regular information exchange and feedback top down and bottom up to raise the awareness and understanding among higher decision making agencies, government and the public. Equally important, Chinese people need to think about what kind of useful role we can play with the help of mobile media.

1 Vertical model means the information flow from central government to the people. See Blecher M. (1983).

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