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# Mobile Activism and Contentious Politics in Contemporary China

## Communicating beyond information

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**Abstract:** The past decade has seen an increasingly use of the mobile phone as a facilitator for protests in liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes. Yet, to date how the use of mobile phones affects participation in protests remains largely unclear and under-theorized. To fill this gap, this study employs the distinction between communication and metacommunication to investigate the informational and relational dimensions of the mobile phone in protest mobilization in four cases in rural and urban China. By drawing upon 53 in-depth interviews, the result reveals that, in addition to communicating mobilizing information, participants metacommunicate their mutual relationships via mobile phones in mobilization process, which greatly shape both the practice of information exchange and the perception and interpretation of information. Such kind of metacommunication acts as the pivotal driving force for mobilization and participation in protests as it involves an engagement of reciprocal relationship, generates a sense of mutual engagement, and enhances a feeling of solidarity. This study concludes that the dynamic of the mobile phone as a facilitator in popular protest lies in its embedding of metacommunication beyond information dissemination.

**Keywords:** mobile phone, protest, metacommunication, mobilization, China, participation, information, relationship, interpersonal network

## Introduction

The growing relevance of the mobile phone in popular protests has attracted considerable attention around the world in the wake of an increasing use of mobile devices in organizing and facilitating collective action and social movements (e.g., Allagui & Kuebler, 2011; Hermanns, 2008; Rafael, 2003; Rheingold, 2002; Suárez, 2006). Some studies elucidate the way in which people employ their mobile phones in sparking and coordinating protests (Liu, 2013; Rafael, 2003; Suárez, 2006). Other explore the social and political context in which mobile devices have been appropriated for contentious activities (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Qiu, 2008). Nevertheless, to date the role of the mobile phone in mobilizing protests remains largely unclear and under-theorized. In particular, little is known about *how* the use of mobile phones affects participation in protests. Such a topic is critical to understand how the mobile phone functions and contributes to *the mechanism of mobilization* in protest, which has been increasingly utilizing this wireless device.

Aiming to fill that gap theoretically and empirically, this study employs the distinction between communication and “metacommunication” (Ruesch & Bateson, 1951) to investigate the role of mobile phones in protests in China. China has the world’s largest mobile phone population since 2001, surpassing 1.1 billion in 2012 (Xinhua, 2012). This number indicates that four out of every five Chinese people are mobile phone users. The ubiquity of mobile phones in China, as in other parts of the world, enables growing mobile-phone–facilitated contentious activities, with the increasing use of the mobile device as a major conduit for initiating demonstrations and triggering mass incidents (*quntixing shijian*), the Chinese

government's euphemism for mass protests (e.g., Fewsmith, 2008; Liu, 2013). The analysis of mobile phones and popular protests in China is thus a prime example to understand the mechanism of mobilization entailed by mobile devices. Moreover, Chinese citizen's reliance on new media in general, and mobile phones in particular, as platforms for facilitating and coordinating protest activities is intensifying as the tightening of the government's control over the mass media persists, leaving citizens with only limited or no access to mass media and mass-mediated public sphere (e.g., Qiu & Chan, 2011; Yang, 2009). Although the number of protests organized or empowered by mobile phones is increasing in China in recent years, so far few studies have devoted to specifically the use of mobile phones in contentious activities in the world's largest authoritarian regime, leaving this field almost blank. Taking the use of mobile phones in protests as the case therefore also contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the place and potential of the mobile phone in political activism in contemporary China.

I first present a critical review of current studies on mobile phones and offline protests. Second, Gregory Bateson's distinction between communication and metacommunication has been introduced and developed as the theoretical framework to look at how the use of mobile phones affects mobilization and participation in protests. Third, I specify case selection, data collection, and analysis methods. Fourth, the empirical part provides a brief overview of four cases in which mobile phones play a crucial role in organizing and facilitating protests. I then go on to scrutinize the use of the mobile phone in the process of mobilization by looking at informational and relational dimensions of mobile communication as the channel for facilitating participation and recruitment in protests. This study concludes the pivotal function

of metacommunication that underpins the dynamic of the mobile phone as a facilitator in protest mobilization beyond information dissemination.

### **Prior research on mobile phones and popular protests**

Howard Rheingold's *Smart Mobs* (2002) is one of the early works on the practice and potential of mobile communication technologies—from text messaging to wireless internet—to augment collective intelligence during protests. Drawing from examples including the Seattle WTO protests in 1999 and the People Power II protests in the Philippines in 2001, Rheingold addresses the emergence of “smart mob” in virtue of the proliferation of wireless technologies that amplify human capability for political activism. In the following decade, the pervasive adoption of the mobile phone for protests in both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes has established this device as an indispensable resource in collective activism and contentious politics. Research on the use of mobile phones in protests consequently flourishes (e.g., Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007: 185-213; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Ibahrine, 2008; Qiu, 2008; Rheingold, 2008; Suárez, 2006). However, discussions on mobile phones and protests are still largely being lumped with those on the internet, failing to differentiate the distinct properties of mobile communication technologies and their respective impacts on contentious activities (Miard, 2012).

Among the studies focusing exclusively on mobile phones in protests, some specify the affordance (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebæk, in press; Gibson, 1977) of mobile

communication technologies—such as availability (i.e., ubiquity of wireless devices), affordability (low-cost terminal and telecommunication fee), efficiency (synchronous interaction and rapid diffusion of information), and autonomous communication network—for protests (e.g., Castells, 2012; Rheingold, 2002; Suárez, 2006). Other underline the relevance of context and inter-media dynamics (e.g., Qiu, 2008) for protest events. Nevertheless, the question that *how* the use of mobile phones translates into offline protest activity remains unclear, and the mobilization mechanism of mobile communication in protests still under-theorized. Commonly, studies have drawn their conclusions curtly from the use of mobile phones—for instance, receiving and forwarding text message calling for protests—to protest participation in practice (e.g., Castells et al., 2007: 188; Rafael, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. Still, both *how* people perceive such kind of mobilizing messages and *why* they follow the instruction from the message remain unspecified.

Furthermore, given the difference between the internet and mobile phones, quite a lot of studies address the relevance of the embedding of existing interpersonal ties and relationship via the mobile phone as a personal communication device in protests (Castells et al., 2007: 185; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Suárez, 2006; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). However, rarely few studies probe into the question that *how* and *why* such kind of mobile-phone-mediated interpersonal relationship affects participation in offline protests, leaving it as a taken-for-granted consequence of mobile communication. As Gould criticizes towards the

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<sup>1</sup> So far only Rafael (2003: 415) addresses the imagined relationship between the mobile phone and the “crowd” as a site for the articulation of fantasies and the circulation of messages in Philippines protest. Still, his study does not illustrate why mobile users “...forwarded messages they received as they followed the messages’ instructions” (403).

viewpoint of prior social ties as a basis for social movement, "...simply observing that social ties affect mobilization is not much of a contribution. It is a bit like noticing that people who are stricken with plague have had contact with other plague victims" (Gould, 2003: 237). Similarly, McAdam censures that, "...showing that these activists were linked to the movement by some prior social tie does not prove the causal potency of that tie" (McAdam, 2003: 287). The question that how existing interpersonal relationship, be it mediated by new communication technologies or not, matters in protest mobilization still needs to be clarified and theorized. In particular, as Bennett, Breunig, and Givens (2008: 286) suggest, more refined questions are needed to understand "...the kinds of communication that individuals use to active personal network" during protests at a finer-grained level. By unpacking the impact of the mobile-phone-mediated interpersonal interaction on protest mobilization in detail, this study aims to provide a nuanced portrait and expounding of the role of the mobile phone in protests.

### **Explaining interpersonal interaction in protests: from communication to metacommunication**

Among many studies on interpersonal interaction, the work of Gregory Bateson on "metacommunication," or "communication about communication" (1951: 209), provides a unique way of thinking certain aspect of interpersonal relationships, mediation, and communication. A complex process that involves not just verbal exchange of information, which is normally regarded as "communication," human communication also encompasses a



variety of exchanged cues and propositions, which, as Betason suggests, shall be considered as metacommunication. More specifically, according to Betason, metacommunication refers to “...all exchanged cues and propositions about (a) codification and (b) relationship between the communicators” (1951: 209). In the process of exchanging information, on the one hand, metacommunication provides *clues* as to how the information that has been communicated should be decoded. On the other hand, metacommunication embodies *mutual relationship* between communicators, which greatly influences how the information should be understood. These two sorts of metacommunication overlap and intertwine with each other in communication practice. The point here is not that the exchanged information via interpersonal interaction is irrelevant. Instead, due to varied codification and relationship between communicators, the same information framed by different metacommunication can be interpreted or perceived as something entirely different, even its opposite (Grof, 1981).

The concept of metacommunication calls for a shift from the *explicit* exchanged information, to communication practice and, in particular, the *implicit* mutual awareness of communicators regarding their relationship, for understanding human communication activity. Regarding the study of human communication, Betason argues,

“...which was almost negligible...is *the real existence* of the group as a determinant of the actions and communications of the separate persons....The condition for the existence of a determinative group in this sense seems to be that *each participant be aware of the perceptions of the other*. If I know that the other person perceives me and he

knows that I perceive him, this *mutual awareness* becomes a part determinant of all our action and interaction.” (1951: 208, italic added)

In other words, beyond the exchanged information, the mutual awareness of the existence of the other side and their relationship plays a key role in human action and interaction in the social world. The mutual awareness thus definitively shapes the metacommunication of interpersonal communication. As Bateson elaborates later, “...the qualities and characteristics of metacommunication between persons will depend upon the qualities and degree of their mutual awareness of each other’s perception” (1951: 209-210). Following this argument, research should take into account the mutual awareness concerning the existence of the other side and the relationship between communicators when investigating the process and effect of human communication.

As Bateson worked in a period before the ubiquitous adoption of mobile phones, he did not have a chance to examine mobile-phone-mediated human communication in current “networked” society (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Nor has his distinction of communication and metacommunication been employed to explicate the mobile-phone-mediated interpersonal communication in protests today. Nevertheless, the concept of metacommunication remains valuable for understanding interpersonal communication in the digital age as it underlines relational implications—one of human-specific features—beyond and greatly shaping literal meanings. Meanwhile, some existing researches touch upon the similar idea regarding the covert relational influence via new media communication, such as “shared awareness” (Shirky, 2008: 163) or “hyper-coordination” (Ling & Yttri, 2002). Ling’s

work (2008) further theorizes how the mobile communication generates social cohesion in everyday life on the basis of mutual engagement and interaction rituals. Nevertheless, few investigate how such covert influence embedding in mobile communication affects mobilization and participation in protests by involving the mutual relationship between communicators and by shaping the denotations and connotations of the exchanged information. Against this backdrop, this study aims to figure out:

What are the characteristics of communication and metacommunication the mobile phone embodies in protests? How do the communication and metacommunication through the mobile phone affect mobilization and participation in protests respectively?

Given the distinction of communication and metacommunication, this study differentiates the informational and relational dimensions of mobile communication in protest mobilization. On the communication side, this study considers what kind of affordances mobile communication technologies generate and shape the flow of information in protest. Research on new media and collective action has identified quite a few contributions from new communication technologies that low barriers to protest mobilization and offer opportunities to recruit movement members (for an overall review, see Garrett, 2006). What will be the *specific* contribution from mobile communication technologies? On the metacommunication side, this study explores how mobile communication transfers the relationship between communicators and how—and to what extent—such relationship affects the practice and interpretation of exchanged information and further contributes to protest mobilization. By interrogating the impact of mobile phones through the prism of

communication and metacommunication, this study aims to provide a picture of the role of mobile phones in protests in detail.

## **Methods**

### *Multiple case study*

To gather a nuanced picture of the use of mobile phones in protests, this study employs a descriptive multiple case study design (Tobin, 2010). In addition to rich qualitative data, this design allows for both comparing differences within and between cases and generalizing what is common across the cases (Yin, 2009: 18). The criteria of case selection include the following three points. First, the cases involve spontaneous use of mobile phones to organize and facilitate protests. Second, the mobile phone has played a crucial role in protest mobilization. Third, whether the case succeeded in, for instance, changing the government's mind or policies through mobile-phone-facilitated protests is not a necessary criterion for selection because there are too many other contingent factors influencing government decisions to act or adopt a certain plan. Given these criteria, this study picks up four cases as follows: the anti-Para-Xylene ("anti-PX" for short) protests in Xiamen in 2007, the Weng'an mass incident in 2008, and the taxi driver strikes in Fuzhou and Shenzhen in 2010. The case descriptions will be provided in next section.

### *Sampling and in-depth interview*

After the case selection, this study adopts the snowball sampling and in-depth interviews for an investigation on the use of mobile phones for protest mobilization in selected cases.

Snowball sampling is a network-based sampling approach that allows researchers to recruit “hidden populations,” or individuals or groups that are not easily accessible through other sampling strategies<sup>1</sup> (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). Meanwhile, as an increasingly relevant interpersonal communication channel for social connections, mobile communication technologies enable individuals within one’s network to be accessed from mobile devices (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling, 2008). The mobile network accordingly provides snowball sampling with a similar network that is based on [mobile-phone-mediated] contacts and structured around interaction. This study locates participants in protests as interviewees through tracking the flow of mobilizing message within the mobile network. I ask a few people<sup>2</sup> as “the seed” to provide both whom they received mobilizing messages from and to whom they distributed these messages via their mobile phones. Then I replicate this process to identify and recruit more participants in protests. Given the mobile phone as both a private tool and the crucial conduit in sample protests, the mobile-network-based sampling procedure guarantees the interviewees’ privacy and ensures their participation in protests. Most important, in China’s tightly controlled and monitored environment, the distribution of calls of protests, no matter through mouth-to-ear or new media platforms, is strictly prohibited, let alone participation in protests (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Against this backdrop, participants are unwilling to be identified after protests. As an outsider to these events, researcher has found it hard to access, or penetrate these participants, because they either decline to be interviewed, or are reluctant to talk too much about their own experiences in protests, or refuse to give the researcher information about other participants who they

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<sup>1</sup> A similar adoption of this approach can be seen in (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012: 367-368).

<sup>2</sup> In the taxi driver strike cases I only asked taxi driver group because they were the sole participants in protests.

know have been involved in protests. Approaching participants through their mobile connections not only keeps issue (i.e., participation in protest) as a low profile without making it public, but also easily gains rapport and trust from interviewees. Such rapport and trust thus assure the validity of research by entailing both a degree of honest dialogue and accurate information from participants and the smooth running of following sampling procedure. Sixty-five participants were initially recruited.

Next, to foreground ethical practices, this study obtains permission from interviewees in all cases. Again, due to the political sensitive nature of protest participation in contemporary China, this study wants interviewees not only to be completely voluntary but also to be safe after joining this research. Interviewees were also assured that the information collected would be securely stored and would only be available to the researcher and that all responses would be carefully analyzed. The sample was, however, reduced to 53 after those who withdrew from the research due to the sensitive issue were removed from the sample.

Then, all interviews were conducted in Chinese in person by the researcher in friendly environments, or in socio-mental spaces that the interviewees would often inhabit or visit. In all cases, the promise of anonymity was essential and mutual respect for each other's viewpoints established. The researcher documented interviews only when the interviewee was comfortable with this. If documenting was seen as too intrusive for a candid conversation, the researcher instead summarized the interview immediately after each session and got confirmation from interviewees. The researcher felt that most interviewees tried their best to

recall their practices, interpretations, and perceptions regarding the role of mobile devices in protests and elaborate them in detail.

A semi-structured interview guide has been designed to explore how interviewees had employed their mobile phones and perceived mobile communication in protests through a focused, conversational communication way between the researcher and the interviewees. The interviews were structured as follows to ascertain both the use of mobile phones and participants' perceptions on the impact of mobile communication in protests: (a) In an introductory section, I asked participants for basic personal data (e.g., age, gender, occupation). (b) Second, I established in detail the availability and the forms of access to different types of media during protests. For instance, did interviewees have access to the internet for reading and distributing mobilizing messages? (c) In a third section, I collected the data regarding information exchanged through mobile communication, such as type (voice or text messaging), content, when these information are received, and how often they are received in protests. This section aims to explore the informational dimension of mobile communication. (d) In a fourth section, the researcher probed into the interpretation of both communication practices and information via the mobile phone, including how interviewees perceive the message on mobile devices, whether they follow it or not and, most important, why. (e) In the fifth section, the researcher mapped out how interviewees deal with mobile phone messages, such as do they disseminate the message or respond to it, to whom they forward the message, via which channels, and why. Crucial to this study are the data that emerged from the fourth and fifth sections, where interviewees were asked to consider and probe their own behaviors in and responses to mobilizing calls/texts they received via mobile

communication and the impact of such information and communication practice on their decision on protest participation. In other words, the fourth and fifth sections delve into the relational dimension of mobile communication in protests. Each interview lasted typically around one and a half hours. A total of 53 interviews were carried out.

### *Data analysis*

After data collection, the explanation-building approach and cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2009: 18) were employed to figure out questions “how” participants adopted their mobile devices as a facilitator for mobilization in the process of protests, what kind of communication and metacommunication mobile phones generates and how the communication and metacommunication through mobile phones affect mobilization and participation in protests.

### **Mobile communication and mobilization to offline protests in China: cases**

Before the discussion on the impact of mobile phones in protests, this section provides an overview of four cases: the anti-PX protests in southeast China’s Xiamen city in 2007, the southwest China’s Weng’an mass incident in 2008, and the taxi driver strikes in Fuzhou and Shenzhen in 2010. Although these four cases took place in different sets of circumstances (urban and rural areas), they include different groups (the middle class in Xiamen, the rural population in Weng’an, and the taxi drivers in Shenzhen and Fuzhou, respectively), and the reasons for these events are entirely different (environment protection, justice-seeking, and complaint about the inappropriate charges from taxi companies and government), all of them embrace the mobile phone as a key means of organizing and facilitating protests.



The anti-PX protest in Xiamen has been labeled as “the power of text messaging” (Reporter, 2007) during a process of remaking a public agenda by text messaging-facilitated demonstrations. Local government initiated a petrochemical project for producing paraxylene (PX), which was later believed having a negative impact on environment, without informing residents. Moreover, to keep its residents from knowing about this project, Xiamen government not just ordered local media not to cover this issue, but also prevented the spread of reports that covered this project by the media outside Xiamen<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the warning regarding the PX project did diffuse via text messaging, which lead to the call for reconsideration and relocation of this project from residents. Instead of responding to residents’ worry or explanation on the impact of project, however, local government asserted that the negative information about the PX project through the internet, emails, and mobile phones was “rumor,” which had been spread by certain rumormongers with “a deliberate aim” to sabotage the reputation of the city<sup>2</sup>. To eliminate popular discussions of this topic, local government quickly shut down several online forums in the name of “preventing rumor spreading.” Public security agencies also launched surveillance to identify what the government labeled “rumormongers,” bringing a chilling effect on people’s daily conversations<sup>3</sup>. Against this backdrop, text messages and calls began ricocheting around Xiamen, urging residents to join a street protest and demonstrate their concern over the environment issue and dissatisfaction towards government practice. One of the most

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, *Phoenix Weekly*, a HongKong-sponsored, Shenzhen-based news magazine, trying to bring the potentially hazardous PX project into the public eye, was seized by the authorities and quickly pulled from shelves in Xiamen. Interviews with residents in Xiamen, December 13, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews with residents in Xiamen, September 4, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with residents, Xiamen, September 4, 2007.

renowned texts that “millions of Xiamen residents forwarded frenziedly around their mobile phones” (Lan & Zhang, 2007) within three day at the end of May read:

“For the sake of our future generations, take action! Participate among 10,000 people, June 1st at 8 a.m., opposite the municipal government building! Hands tied with yellow ribbons [as a symbol associated with environmental protection]! Pass this message on to all your Xiamen friends!”

The proliferation of mobile text calling for protest lead to a two-day street demonstration with over 20,000 participants at the beginning of June,. The local government had been forced to announce the decision to halt construction immediately and relocate the plant six months later. In this process, mobile communication, in particular text messaging, played an indispensable role as the driving force to facilitate the anti-PX protest.

Different from the environment concern in the Xiamen case, the mass incident in Weng'an county was ignited by an allegation of a cover-up over a 16-year-old girl's “unusual death” (Ding, 2008). The girl was found dead in a river on June 22. After a postmortem examination, local government declared the girl had committed suicide by leaping into the river. But her relatives refused to accept the results and claimed she had been raped, killed, and then tossed into the river by two male suspects, who were believed to have familial ties with local public security bureau. The girl's family went to petition at the county party committee office, but later local police refused their petition for a thorough examination of the corpse. Tension mounted and some sayings that the girl's relatives had been assaulted by the police instead of getting justice then floated about. Some mobile messages read,

“Without conducting a full autopsy, the police believed the girl committed suicide by jumping in a river, and they did not take mandatory measures against the suspect and ignored the family’s call for a full autopsy.” (Buckley, 2008)

Such message drew the public anger as the death of the girl became intertwined with corrupt government officials, merciless policemen, and perceived injustice across the small county. On June 28, texts and calls mobilized almost 10,000 people who went to public security bureau where they smashed and burned all the police vehicles parked there and set fire to government buildings, including the local Communist party headquarters (Yu, 2008).

The taxi drivers’ strikes in southeast China’s Fuzhou and south China’s Shenzhen are two in a long line of driver protests since 2008 (Branigan, 2008). The discontent with the controversially rigid manner of enforcing traffic regulations by local police and the long-standing concerns including unlicensed competition, high fuel prices, and rising rental fees due to the inaction of local government has lead up to taxi drivers in several cities staged strikes one after another between 2008 and 2013 by primarily using calls and texts via their mobile phones (Gao, 2009; *Global Times*, 2013; Huang & Wills, 2011). Among these strikes, taxi drivers attempted at the very beginning to post their discontent to China’s Twitter-like microblogging service, *Weibo*, to look for government response and the public support (Lee, 2011). However, most of such information had been deleted or blocked in a short time. Also due to the censorship from government, local media were not allowed to air drivers’ grievance and anger<sup>1</sup>. On April 23, 2010, in response to an unbearable surge in penalties

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews with local journalists and editors in Fuzhou and Shenzhen, December 2010.

handed out by the police, taxi drivers in Fuzhou went on strike, leaving many local commuters stuck on streets and arousing concern about the controversially rigid manner of enforcing traffic regulations by local police (Reporter, 2010). In addition to mouth-to-ear interaction, mobile call had become the major conduit for the strikes<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, over 3,000 taxi drivers took part in a three day strike that organized largely through mobile communication in Shenzhen at the end of October 2010 to protest at the failure of taxi companies and the government to address the problems of suburban drivers and the city's inequitable cab fare structure. As strikes by taxi drivers have become more frequent as soaring costs have pinched profits for drivers, the mobile phone has emerged as a key channel for distributing strike calls and organizing protests.

### **Findings and discussions: communication and metacommunication through the mobile phone for protests**

#### *Inexpensiveness, immediacy, and independence: communicating information for protest*

The informational dimension of mobile communication concerns about how mobile technologies shape the exchange and flow—communication, in short—of information for protests. The interview thus focuses on the use of the mobile phone in conveying information in protests. Accordingly to the interviewees, the communication via mobile phones in protests

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<sup>1</sup> The mouth-to-ear discussion and protest mobilization normally carried out in petrol stations when taxi drivers fueled their cars for changeover. Also it is not allowed to use the mobile phones in petrol stations. Interviews with taxi drivers in Fuzhou, December 2010.

features the following three characteristics—inexpensiveness, immediacy, and independence—which create favorable conditions for protest mobilization.

First, *inexpensiveness* involves both the low-cost, easy-to-use mobile device as the key mobilizing facilitator and the cheap telecommunication price for information dissemination, be it through voice call or text messaging, for protests. The ubiquity of mobile phones and the low-priced telecommunication fee have made this device one of the most widely used today that embedding into our everyday life (Ling, 2013). The capability for lowering the threshold of organizing and coordinating protests is accordingly immense, as mobile phones—cheaper to own and easier to run than computers—gain ground as tools for facilitating collective action and other forms of contentious politics.

Second, *immediacy* refers to the instantaneous information transfer service via mobile phones, in particular the synchronous voice call, which enables rapid mobilization for protests. Mobile communication technologies allows for the establishment of “perpetual contact” (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) through which each mobile user is personally addressable anytime anywhere (Ling, 2008: 3). In this way, the transfer of information—mobilizing message in this case—takes place instantaneously. The immediate communication makes the proliferation of mobilizing messages happen within a short period, leaving the authorities difficult to predict when and where a proliferation of mobilizing message via mobile communication will erupt and further hardly to intervene the outbreak of protests. In the Xiamen case, a civil servant admits that local government never realizes that the mobilizing text for anti-PX protests will go viral merely via mobile phones and reach “million of

residents” (Lan & Zhang, 2007) within three days, finally resulting in offline demonstrations<sup>1</sup>. Largely depending on voice calls, the tax drivers had even initiated and organized strikes *overnight* in the Fuzhou case. Similar flash demonstration can also be observed, for instance, on election day eve in the 2004 Spanish general election (Suárez, 2006). Immediacy thus brings about the *potential* of rapid mobilization, which may leave the authorities unprepared for protests. Moreover, even it is possible to detect the spread of call for protests, “...still it is impossible to predict to what extent such kind of messages will be distributed and how many people will be informed [about protests].”<sup>2</sup> In this way, the immediacy of communication through mobile phones attributes unpredictability to protests, which to a degree guarantees the unfolding of protests from the authorities’ intervention.

Third, *independence* includes a two-fold meaning: the independent operation of wireless telecommunication service as an alternative channel to the highly controlled internet platform for communication and the self-directed process of information dissemination by communicator. On the one hand, the operation of mobile telephony service is an independent system, which is different from, for instance, social media like the Twitter (or *Weibo*, the Chinese microblogging platforms) or the Facebook (or *Renren*, the Chinese social network website), which have to largely depend on mobile and web-based technologies to provide interactive platforms. The mobile telephony services—voice call, text messaging and so on—run more or less independently by telecommunication operation. This is by no mean that

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a civil servant in local government in Xiamen, September 4, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a civil servant in local government in Xiamen, September 4, 2007.

there is no censorship in wireless telecommunication services<sup>1</sup>. But it becomes more difficult to supervise and control the information flow via wireless telecommunication. Regarding the internet control, the government can shut down website or disable certain functions to disrupt or prevent the flow of information<sup>2</sup>. However, when the authorities try to stop the spread of information via wireless telephony service, they have to shut down the *whole* telecommunication network. Such a decision is easily to cause a sort of “substantial collateral damage” (Zuckerman, 2014), such as the interruption of mundane communication in work and life, which will not only trigger a larger-scale discontent with the government, but also impede the functioning of authorities as they have already integrated mobile services as part of the propaganda system. As such, the government has to prudently pursue its means of putting mobile service under control. For instance, this study observes that in all four cases the authorities carried out censorships, including deleting what they regarded as “sensitive words” and shutting down online forums to stop the flow of mobilizing information online. Only in the Xiamen case local government tried to stop the diffusion of mobilizing messages by shutting down telecommunication service. Even though, the government has been forced to reopen this service after around two hours, partly due to a large amount of complaints from government employees themselves as they also largely rely on mobile network to carry out their work<sup>3</sup>. In short, as an alternative channel of communication, the relatively independent

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<sup>1</sup> A key-work filtering system similar to the “Great Firewall” in the internet has also established by telecommunication companies upon government request. Interview with a deputy director in local telecommunication company in Fuzhou, December 2, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in 2009 government has blocked the internet access in Xinjiang for 10 months after ethnic riots.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a civil servant in local government in Xiamen, September 4, 2007.

operation of mobile telecommunication service to a degree prevents the flow of mobilizing messages from abrupt interruption by the authorities.

On the other hand, mobile communication is a self-controllable process. You can decide by your own what kind of and how much information you would like to deliver to whom—or several people—at what time. In the case of protests, the communicator thus is able to decide independently the *specific* receivers whom he/she would like to share mobilizing information with and, more important, who are most likely to be recruited into protests or even to mobilize more people into protests. Such kind of communication also allows for adopting different persuasive skills for mobilization according to different objects. This process thus provides participants autonomy to maximize their controls over the procedure of mobilization, which in turn increases the possibility of persuasion in protests mobilization.

Given the experience and response from interviewees, this study observes that participants use their mobile phones to communicate mobilizing information in a way of inexpensiveness, immediacy, and independence. The lower costs and access to easy-to-use mobilizing tools makes it significantly easier for ordinary people, even those without complex digital skills (e.g., the taxi drivers), to initiate and coordinate protest movement. The immediacy lays a foundation for rapid diffusion of mobilizing message, which amplifies the scale of influence of mobilization. Independence not only means the process of mobilization taking place through a relatively independent and alternative channel comparing to the internet. It also refers to the fact that by using their mobile devices for mobilization, people act on their own when deciding whom they should spread the message to and how to recruit



them into protests. In other words, the mobile phone offers greater autonomy to participants for handling the process of mobilization and recruitment in protest. Furthermore, these three characteristics have intertwined with each other and shape the process of communicating mobilizing information together. The immediate interaction facilitates the proliferation of mobilizing messages and accordingly generates the possibility of rapid mobilization. In this way, communicating information for protests through mobile phones creates favorable conditions for unfolding of protests.

*Reliability, reciprocity, and solidarity: metacommunicating beyond information for protests*

Although mobile communication, given its characteristics of inexpensiveness, immediacy, and independence, facilitates the distribution of information that underpins the groundwork for protest mobilization, its role so far is merely around creating a *possibility* for protest. What is the key mechanism that transfers such possibility into reality? Given the mediated interaction of mobile phones (Ling, 2008: 119), the metacommunication—which embodies both the mutual relationship and the specific way of interpreting exchanged information in terms of such relationship—endows mobilizing information with senses of reliability, reciprocity, and solidarity beyond its literacy content, shaping how people reflect on and act upon the mobilizing message.

First, the mutual relationship between communicators has a huge and decisive impact on the practice of distributing and responding mobilizing messages. As the previous section addresses, information dissemination via mobile phones is a self-controllable process in which the sender decides on his/her own the receiver[s] of mobilizing message. In practice,

selecting receivers for mobilizing message is neither a random process nor a simple inclusion of all the names in a person's mobile phone directory. Instead, the consideration regarding mutual relationship between sender and receiver ranks above all else. As one interviewee elaborates,

“...you have to think over that to whom you would like to send such kind of information [calling for protest]. In particular, you have to take into consideration *your mutual relationship*, including the trust and reliability of the other side...Given the relationship between both sides, will the receiver response to your appeal? To what extent will the receiver join the protest, or recruit more participators by distributing the message to a broader scope? ... calling for protests is one of ‘the top forbidden contents’ in China [as the government always strives hard to eliminate such kind of messages]. You have to be sure that the receiver is reliable and the authorities will not be able to detect protest organization by being informed by the receivers in advance.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, the decision on who should be the receiver of mobilizing information relies on the sender's perception of *reliability* toward the other side on the basis of mutual relationship. In the process of delivering mobilizing messages, more specifically, the sender starts by looking for receivers in his/her personal network [as in mobile phone directory] who will respond in “a *predictable* way”<sup>2</sup> to his/her appeal for protest. The “predictable” way refers to that the receiver will give a positive response to the request on protest participation. The higher level of mutual reliability as the sender perceives, the greater the possibility of protest participation

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews with a university student in Xiamen, December 14, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews with residents in Weng'an, December 22, 2008.

he/she believes, the more likely he/she will pick up the person as the receiver. The higher degree of mutual trust as the sender believes, the more security in protest organization, the more likely he/she will deliver mobilizing message to the person as the receiver. As one interviewee summarizes, “sending [mobilizing] message to the correct person is the very first step for successful protest.”<sup>1</sup>

The mutual relationship also greatly shapes the response to such messages in next step. As soon as getting the message, receiver will, first and foremost, see such a message as an appeal from his/her friends beyond a simple piece of mobilizing information as such. In this way, the communication of information implies “a sign of inclusion” (Ling, 2008: 119) from receivers’ social connections. As one interviewee explains, “...it [the message] is more than a piece of information. Because it [the message] is a piece of information *from a specific sender*, who would be your friends, colleague, relative and so on.”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, whether or not—and how—to response to the request in this message from *a specific sender* (Ling, 2004: 151) depend not on just the information itself, but more important on the mutual relationship between communicators.

For the sender, as we already see, the practice of distributing protest information to a specific receiver shows his/her belief towards the trust and reliability of the receiver. For the receiver, the positive response to the request not only confirms the reliability and trust from the sender, but also demonstrates the *reciprocity* in mutual relationship. One interviewee as the receiver explains, “...beyond informing you about protest issue, the message actually asks

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a graduate student in Xiamen, December 6, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a 25-year-old taxi driver in Shenzhen, December 20, 2010

for your participation as a kind of reciprocal help in terms of your mutual relationship.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, as the receiver perceives it, how he/she deals with mobilizing request will definitely affect the way in which the sender handles the appeal from him/her in future beyond participation issue at hand. In this way, it is the mutual relationship—reciprocity in particular—instead of the information that generates a sort of “pressure” on receiver upon how he/she responds to the mobilizing call.

In this way, the reciprocal relationship between sender and receiver deteriorates when the receiver rejects to join the protest, or even when the receiver fails to reply the request in time, because such kind of reaction “...shows that the other side does not really care about the sender’s appeal and the [reciprocal] relationship between both sides per se...in future it will be difficult for you to gain help from the sender as you are the one who first failed to maintain your reciprocity.”<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, the reciprocity of mutual relationship encourages the receiver to accept the request, engage in protests, and further distribute the mobilizing call in his/her personal network.

Furthermore, for the sender, the feedback from receiver, normally through mobile communication as well, nurtures a sense of mutual engagement and further consolidates their decision on protest participation. More specifically, communicating mobilizing information is more than a practice of twiddling the mobile phone. Instead, it is an *action* against the authorities who always tried its hard to snuff out the possibility of collective action. In other words, the dissemination of and response to call for protest are already part of protest activity.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a 43-year-old taxi driver in Fuzhou, October 5, 2010

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a 33-year-old taxi driver in Fuzhou, October 5, 2010

Accordingly, for receivers, the mobilizing message implies that the sender has already engaged himself/herself in protest. Similarly, for senders, the positive response also confirms the receivers' engagement in protest. As such, the perception of mutual engagement in protest becomes "...a catalyst in the construction of social cohesion" (Ling, 2008: 9), leading to the tightening of relationship and a sense of solidarity in protest participation.

Moreover, the mobilizing message (i.e., text messaging) multiplies as more and more people join the distribution of information; in turn, the chance to receive the identical or similar message rises. In a circular fashion, people perceive increasing sense of support and solidarity as they receive the message from multiple *known, reliable* sources in their personal network. As one interviewee notes, "...knowing that quite a lot of friends and relatives have engaged in the demonstration [against the PX project] as I received messages [via my mobile phone] from them really empowers the feeling of togetherness against what government has done."<sup>1</sup> Instead of being as scattered individuals, participants realize that they are in fact "networked individuals" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) enjoying support and solidarity from their social network. The feeling of empowerment from support and solidarity pushes more and more people to forward the mobilizing call on the one hand, and makes them more willing to engage in protest. Their active practice, such as distributing mobilizing call to more friends, further motivates the process of mobilization and recruitment, making more and more people engage in protest.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a white collar in Xiamen, December 3, 2007

To sum up, by introducing the mutual relationship, or the relational dimension of mobile communication, metacommunication through mobile phones plays a pivotal role in protest mobilization. The mutual relationship through metacommunication not just shapes the interpretation of mobilizing messages but more important transfers the perception of reliability, strengthens the sense of reciprocity, and nourishes the feeling of solidarity for protest participation beyond communicating mobilizing information. This finding resonates with Katz's argument on that interpersonal relations are not just channels of information, but also sources of social pressure and social support (1957: 77). Again, the sense of reliability, reciprocity and solidarity are intertwined in the process of mobile communication. The reliability strengthens the feeling of reciprocity in protests, while the practice of reciprocity [i.e., join protests] secures and further intensifies mutual reliability and the feeling of solidarity in protests. In this way, it is the metacommunication through mobile communication that acts as a key part of the mechanism of mobilization in protest.

#### *Reflection on communication and metacommunication via the mobile phone in protest*

As this study figures out, mobile communication technologies offers a *potential* platform for protest mobilization in an unpredictable, hardly-to-control way due to the characteristics of inexpensiveness, immediacy, and independence of informational exchange. The informational dimension, however, is not the driving force for protest participation. Instead, it is the metacommunication, in which the mutual relationship between communicator has been embedding in communication, that plays as the pivotal role for protest mobilization. More precisely, the mutual relationship becomes the key factor for participation and recruitment in

protests by shaping the practice of information exchange behaviors and by influencing the interpretation of mobilizing message. Accordingly, the dynamic of the mobile phone as a facilitator in protest lies in its embedding of metacommunication beyond information dissemination.

Here, it is necessary to underline that, the role and function of metacommunication through the mobile phone is both positive and negative for protest. On the one hand, the metacommunication articulates and accumulates the social network and relational support of participants, generating the sense of solidarity that ensures the mobilization of protest in spite of strictly control over collect action in China. On the other hand, the metacommunication may make the decision on protest participation more to do with the influence of personal relations than with being devoted to the protest itself. In other words, the motivation of protest participation has its origin in largely a combination of fear of losing one's social support with the desire for the maintenance of a long-term, good social relationship within one's social network. Accordingly, the *real* motivation to against the authorities' decision, although it is the mainspring of the protest, is by no means the most powerful of the motives that makes the protest go round. As the response from interviewees, in particular those with low literacy (i.e., the taxi driver and the rural population), supports, participants are normally lack of considerations regarding, for instance, how do they achieve the aim of protest (e.g., request government to amend the management regulation for the benefit of taxi drivers), what kind of strategies they would adopt to expand the influence of protests, and so on. As a result, this study observes that the protest participation and mobilization via mobile devices is more

or less relationship-driven, which accordingly restricts its long-run impact on Chinese contentious politics.

## **Conclusion**

The mobile phones is galvanizing and shaping collective activism in contemporary China as it does in many parts of the world. By investigating four cases involving the use of mobile phones as a requisite resource for protest mobilization with 53 in-depth interviews, the study observes the role of the mobile phone as a key facilitator in protest with two-fold function. On the one hand, the mobile phone as an alternative means provides an easy way for the proliferation of mobilizing information within a short time, which further generates a base for rapid mobilization. On the other hand, beyond the communication of mobilizing message, more important, the mobile phone as an interpersonal communication device introduces the dynamics of interpersonal relationship through metacommunication. The incorporation of mutual relationship shapes both the communicative practice of information exchange and the interpretation of message. Importantly, through the prism of metacommunication, the mobile-phone-mediated interpersonal relationship plays as a pivotal mechanism of mobilization in affecting people's decision to protest participation. As a result, the dynamic of the mobile phone as a facilitator in popular protest lies in its embedding of metacommunication that embodies interpersonal relationship beyond information dissemination.



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