Rumor, Mobile Phone, and Resistance

in contemporary China

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Abstract: This study examines the characteristics and nature of rumor via mobile communication in contemporary China. By focusing on six concrete case studies with 50+ in-depth interviews, this study observes that mobile phone-mediated rumor has evolved into a special form of popular resistance at the grassroots level. The low-cost and user-friendly mobile device lowers the average protest threshold, creating an unprecedented opportunity for people, especially those without complicated communication skills, to organize, coordinate, or participate in resistance. The mutual visibility of meta-communication through mobile network greatly increases both credibility of information and sense of security for participation. Additionally, the synchronous mobile communication accumulates rumor discourse into resistance in a very short time. As a new kind of contentious politics, rumor dissemination via mobile phones show the opposition to government censorship and control of communications, and most important, the resistance against the use of the accusation of "rumor" by authorities to stifle any different voices.

RUMOR AND NEW MEDIA IN THE INFORMATION AGE

The ubiquity of new media technologies has generated unprecedented possibilities for the proliferation of rumor (e.g., Harsin 2006; Solove 2007; Sunstein 2009). With these increasingly popular information technologies such as the Internet and mobile phone, for instance, rumors multiply and cripple political campaign (e.g., Kolbert 2009), or thrive and damage business reputation (e.g., Solove 2007), or even escalate and trigger panics in society (e.g., Kleinman and Watson 2006).

In particular, rumor through new media platforms plays a specific political role in the Chinese context. On the one hand, to snuff out dissent and ensure political stability, authorities strive to crack down on rumor-mongering and prevent rumors from circulating specifically through the Internet and mobile phones. To guarantee the legitimacy in anti-rumor actions, governments normally emphasize the false, fabricated, defamatory, and irrational nature of rumors. The strategies adopted also consist in naming rumor as "a 'new-style' political weapon" (Chen 2011; Smith 2006) by certain foreign forces to attack the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), drawing colorful parallels between rumors and "pornography, gambling and drugs" (Chen 2011), or endowing rumor-mongering with a counter-revolutionary initiative (Smith 2006) or "an ulterior motive"—it is made out to disturb social order, disrupt public security, or even incite to overthrow state power (Hu 2011; Ministry of Public Security 1988; Zhang 2010). Against this backdrop, the ruling CPC legitimizes activities of cracking down on the rumor mill through law and regulation (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 2006). Accordingly, public security organs launch surveillance and investigations to search out and arrest rumormongers, quash rumors, and eliminate their "perni-

cious effects" on social and political stability (Beijing Daily Messenger 2003; Li 2005: 197-199; Smith 2006: 409-411).

On the other hand, although Chinese authorities have tried it hard to eradicate rumor, rumors spring up one after another, frequently putting the whole society in a state of anxiety and nervousness (Li 2005, 2011; Pan 2008: 202; Smith 2006, 2008; Wu 2011). Not least new media platforms, including mobile devices, online forums and twitter-like *Weibo* sites, have quickly become the relevant rumor-mongering machines ever in China (Bristow 2012; Wang and Sun 2010). Frequent Internet and mobile phone-disseminated rumor emergences affect the country, turning it into "the people's Republic of Rumors" (Larson 2011), aggravating social tensions, and evoking collective actions in recent years (Chen and Pan 2006; Ding 2008). *What is the dynamics of new media rumors*? Understanding the new media rumor, among many other things, offers not just "a useful insight into popular attitudes and mood" (Smith 2006: 407), but also a key approach to reveal deep-seated structural problems in contemporary Chinese society (Li 2005; Young 2011; Zhou 2010).

This paper first proposes a theoretical framework for investigating rumor as a form of unofficial communication and formulates methodology with regard to new media rumor in general, and mobile phone-disseminated rumor in particular in contemporary China. Second, it elaborates the distinctive social-technological features of mobile phone-mediated rumor in contemporary China. Third, it analyzes rumors dissemination with a view to excavating the dynamics that shapes the ways in which rumors are proliferating. This paper summarizes mobile phone-mediated rumor as an emerging kind of resistance in contentious politics in contemporary China.

RUMOR AS UNOFFICIAL COMMUNICATION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rumor as unofficial communication

Although there is no universally consensus of what rumor is in the humanities and social sciences, two overall definitions have been given in previous studies. One treats rumor as a kind of message (Berenson 1952; DiFonzo and Bordia 2007b; Kapferer 1990; Morin 1971; Peterson and Gist 1951) or proposition (Allport and Postman 1947; Knapp 1944; Rosnow 1980; Rosnow and Fine 1976), while the other values rumor as a form of communication (Kapferer 1990; Rosnow 1988; Shibutani 1966; for the overview, see Fleub 1962). The former tends to regard rumor as a false, unverified, or even distorted piece of information, which easily results in the simplified view of rumor as misinformation or even disinformation (Allport and Postman 1947; Kapferer 1990; Knapp 1944; Rosnow and Fine 1976; Sunstein 2009). The latter, on the contrary, views rumor as an essential part of collective problem-solving process through dozens of communicative acts, which goes beyond "any particular set of words" (Kapferer 1990: 50; Shibutani 1966: 16). Specifically, in his influential sociological study of rumors, Shibutani defines rumor as:

> "a recurrent form of *communication through which men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources.*" (Shibutani 1966: 17) [italic in original]

Human beings generate rumor as "improvised news" through "a collective transaction" to cope with their uncertainties of life when the formal communication channel fails to provide them with badly-needed or

trustworthy information. More importantly, "…the transformation of rumor content – usually called 'distortion' – is actually part of the developmental process through which men strive for understanding and consensus." (p. 16) Therefore, "…falsehood is not a necessary feature of rumor" (p. 17) and "[r]umor is not so much distortion of some word combination but what is held in common." Additionally, "[t]o focus attention upon words, then, is to misplace emphasis." (Shibutani 1966: 16, also see Donovan 2007; Pendleton 1998: 70)

Taking rumor as a form of communication not only reformulates the understanding of rumor beyond a falsehood with deleterious effect, but also provides a broader theoretical framework for understanding rumor as a kind of collective action that aims at giving meaning to unexplained phenomena and events through communicative activities. Rumor therefore generates unofficial communication outside the established system of communication, or the so-called "the institutional channel" (Shibutani 1966: 31-62). Accordingly, consideration should be given to the dynamics of (new media) rumor as unofficial communication.

Rumor and new media in China: research method and cases

This study discusses rumor as unofficial communication and a form of collective actions by taking six samples of mobile phone-mediated rumors and rumor groups in contemporary China as an example. Concerning the choice of methods, critics argue that rumor researches under laboratory experimentation are far from real circumstances, which provides less accuracy description of the process of rumor spread. For instance, Peterson and Gist (1951) point out as follows:

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

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

> "If rumors are viewed as the cooperative improvisation of interpretations, it becomes apparent that they cannot be studied fruitfully apart from the social contexts in which they arise. They are not isolated reports but phases of a more inclusive adjustive process, and the analysis of symbolic content alone is not likely to yield adequate understanding. An appreciation of any rumor requires some knowledge of the sensitivities shared by the people and the manner in which they are mobilizing to act." (Shibutani 1966: 23)

Therefore, the study here adopts the "situational approach" to look into rumor spread in contemporary China. To get a first-hand understanding of rumor spreading in natural settings, the research is based on telephone interviews and fieldwork conducted inside China between 2007 and 2011, including observations and face-to-face in-depth interviews with participators that have been involved in spreading rumor. Researcher has also employed five assistants to record the spontaneous emergence and flow of rumors in a limited group setting (e.g. people they already know well) for the sake of portraying more accurate description of the process of

rumor spread and specifying its evolution in a natural situation. Our cases include three types of rumor as follows:

The first type is rumor that sparks *panic*, including the 2010 Shanxi earthquake rumor (Wang and Sun 2010) and the 2011 Xiangshui chemical explosion rumor (Xinhua 2011). Of natural disaster rumors, earthquake rumors easily trigger the greatest panics in China, in particular after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. Among these rumors, the one swirling in Shanxi Province at the beginning of 2010 not only launched widespread panic, but also prompted thousands of people in dozens of cities and counties to leave their houses and evacuate to the streets after midnight (China Daily 2010; Li and Zhao 2010; Lv and Wang 2010; Wang and Sun 2010).

The message about an impending earthquake had haunted residents as early as January 6 after earthquake emergency drills were conducted in local hospitals. And for local residents' misgivings, if there was not any earthquake prediction, why did government organize such drill? (Wang and Sun, 2010) Government, however, "turned a blind eye"[1] to people's anxiety and kept silent. The official reticence deepened the unease in several cities in Shanxi Province. Around 3 a.m. on February 21, the rumor of an imminent destructive quake circulated by word of mouth and mobile phones became the last straw that broke the camel's back. Residents in several cities fled to streets and parks for security, texting or calling their family members and friends at once about this "confirmed" information that there would be a 6.0 magnitude earthquake occurs between 1 and 7 a.m.. Even though local government disproved earthquake rumors

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

via mass media, sent over 20 million SMS to require people not to forward earthquake rumors and encouraged them to return to their houses, people kept sending warnings via their mobile phone and "waited for an earthquake" till the dawn (Xinhua 2011).

Natural disaster rumor is not the only one which sets off large scale panic and leads the masses to flee for their life. Around 2 a.m. on February 10, 2011, more than 10,000 residents of four townships swarmed onto the streets after a message went viral mostly through mobile phone, saying that a chemical factory would explode in the coastal county named Xiangshui in east China's Jiangsu Province. Local government declared soon that "chemical factory explosion" is a rumor originated by a villager name Liu Hongshan, who believed that the chemical factories nearby were leaking gas and would explode before long after he found "white smoke" from one plant and smelled a more pungent odor than usual. Public security agent detained Liu and government announced that this matter was totally a rumor-induced panic. Government's announcement, however, failed to calmed public fears[2].

The second type is rumor that triggers *demonstration*, including the 2007 Xiamen anti-PX demonstration and the 2011 Dalian anti-PX demonstration (BBC 2011; Huang 2008; Kurtenbach 2008). Mobile phone-mediated rumors result in not just panics and exoduses but also demonstrations and popular protests. The demonstration and popular protest against the paraxylene project—known as the PX project—in Xiamen in 2007 and Dalian in 2011 are cases in point. Because the mobile-phone-

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[2] Interviews with residents in Xiangshui, Jiangsu Province, February 2011.

driven anti-PX movement in Xiamen greatly influences the resistant activities afterward, including the Dalian one, we introduce Xiamen case in particular.

Rumor circulation fulfills a vital role for triggering protests against the PX project in Xiamen. Fearing petrochemical contamination, Zhao Yufen, a professor of chemistry and chemical engineering from Xiamen University, raised the opposition to the construction of PX project during the "Two Congresses" (*lianghui*)[3] in March 2007. However, both local government and media had largely kept quiet about Zhao's argument until a text message broke the silence, warning that "…when this massive toxic chemical product [PX project] goes into production, that will mean an atomic bomb has been set off in all of Xiamen island. The people of Xiamen will live with leukemia and deformed babies.... "[4]. Environmental protection concern initiates resident's worry. Despite the government had being barraged by inquiries from local people, there was yet to be any official response or explanation. Instead, the commentators at the website of local party organ *Xiamen Daily* rebuked that Zhao "does not have true expertise" and knew little about environmental protection. Additionally, "she [Zhao] was manufacturing *rumors* to mislead the public" and she "was deliberately trying to ruin the image of Xiamen"[5]. News report as

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[3] The National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which by principle supervise the enforcement of the Constitution and the operation of all levels of governments.

[4] Text message content.

[5] Interviews with journalists in Xiamen, Fujian Province, September, 2010. Also see (The Sun 2007).

well consulted an anonymous chemistry expert from the Chinese Academy of Sciences who rejected that "the *rumor* that PX can easily lead to deformed babies" is "exaggerated" (Zhu 2007).

However, the above denials failed to stop the transmission and persistence of rumor. On the contrary, millions of local residents joined the campaign against the PX project by circulating the "rumor" via their mobile phones. By the end of May, residents started to organize a demonstration against the PX project in order to show their discontent and attract government's attention. Mobilization SMS calling on people to "take action!", "tie yellow ribbons", "participate among 10,000 people" and "pass this message on to all your Xiamen friends!" proliferated within hours. On the other hand, interviews revealed that, local government tried to persuade residents that the mobilization messages had been sent from people with "ulterior motives [for retarding local development]". As local government urged, residents should "not trust or spread malicious *rumors*" and "never be used by other people who have ulterior motives"[6] (*Xiamen Daily* 2007). But even after the authority and the police launched a crackdown on rumormonger, the rumor still continued its course and lead to the demonstration beyond government's expectation in June 1.

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

The same was true for the mass protests against the PX plant in the northeast city of Dalian on August 14, 2011. Organized through mobile phone, *Weibo* and social networks, over 10,000 residents, mostly middle-to-upper class, marched through the streets to demand the relocation of chemical plant at the center of a toxic spill scare, despite ramped-up government crackdown and state media campaign against rumors of pollution from the PX project.

The third type is rumor that leads to *mass incident*, including the 2008 Weng'an mass incident (Buxi 2008; Ding 2008; Zhang et al. 2008) and the 2011 Zhengcheng mass incident (Han, 2011). More commonly, rumor has resulted in violent conflicts—usually fatal—when it contains one or several of the following elements: death [by unnatural causes], rape, assault, corruption, abuse of power and forced demolitions. The most notable example is the mass incident in Weng'an County in southwestern Guizhou province in 2008. A 16 year-old local girl was found dead in a river. After the official autopsies, local authorities concluded that her death was a suicide by drowning. The internet and mobile phone, however, had been awash with rumors quickly that this was no suicide: that the girl had been raped and murdered by a relative of a senior county official or police officer (Ding 2008; Ma 2008). Local government denied the rumor and further hired commentators to try to guide public opinions, but to little effect (Ma 2008). After the girl's family went to petition at the country party committee office, fast-proliferating rumor spreading through mobile phone and the internet asserted that the relatives and some of the victim's classmates who went to the police headquarters to question the government's conclusion had been beat up and later died instead of getting justice (Shu 2009; Zhao et al. 2008). With rumor's mobilization, according to Xinhua's

report, up to 30,000 people assaulted and torched local police station and smashed county government office buildings (Xinhua 2008; Yu 2008).

The picture was similar in the mass incident in Zhengcheng in southern Guangdong province in June 2011. When *chengguan*, or "urban administration" inspectors, a secondary security force employed to take pressure off the police by enforcing regulations, tried to move a vendor and his pregnant wife's market stall away from a supermarket entrance, the woman had been shoved to the ground after she refused to move her market stall (Han 2011). *Chengguan*'s action led up to a clash on the set between crowds of onlookers and *chengguan* together with police officers who arrived later. Rumor through mobile phone and the internet then floated around the city, saying that police had injured the expectant mother and killed her husband. Hundreds of migrant workers rioted next day, setting fire to cars and damaging local government buildings. According to China Daily, mayor of Zhengcheng urged local residents "not to spread concocted rumors" while local government was racing to "clarify the rumor about a clash between security personnel and a pregnant street vendor" by sending working groups to factories and households (Zheng 2011). However, authority's repeated refusal did little to silence the rumormongers[7].

Our study sample is composed of 57 interviewees ranging from journalists and students to NGO leaders and local peasants. The interview includes three sets of questions as follows: one on *the basic information* in mobile phone-mediated rumor, such as its content, when it is received, and

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[7] Interview with 30-year-old journalist, Guangzhou, March 2011.

how many do they receive; a second set of questions on the interpretation of rumor *via mobile phone*, including how people see the rumor from their mobile device, whether they believe it or not and why; a third set of questions registers how people *deal with* rumor via their mobile phones, such as do they join rumor dissemination, to whom, via which channels, and why.

There are two things we need to clarify during our case selection.

First, the messages this study picks out as "rumors" are based on government statements and news reports. However, that does not mean we share with the government and mass media the position of viewing these messages as "fabrications deliberately spread with a malicious intent." Instead, this study aims to elaborate how and why these official labeling "rumors" flourish through mobile phones. It is therefore not our intent to explore the origin of rumors, whether or not they are true, or who is the so-called "ill-intentioned mastermind" behind rumor thrives. It is notable that, during our interviews, many of our interviewees do not care too much about whether or not the content (message itself) is true.

Second, unlike previous studies that have mostly revolved around the content, this study only looks at how the communicative channel (mobile phone) functions when people trade in rumors. In other words, it focuses on the technologically-mediated channel of rumor spread and its reason rather than its content. If rumor is "an interpretive transaction made up of communicative acts" (Shibutani 1966: 131), then, without doubt, the communicative channel plays a relevant role in dissemination. With a careful examination from the technical, social and cultural factors, we will be

able to provide a richer and more comprehensive illustration and under-standing of new media rumor.

HOW MOBILE TECHNOLOGY EMPOWERS RUMOR

To understand the dynamics of mobile phone-mediated rumor in contemporary China, we must first grasp how mobile technology influences or changes rumor spreading in the context of China. Meantime, we should not forget that social settings shape technologies just as much as vice versa (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985; Williams and Edge 1996). To get a comprehensive picture of how these two factors combine to influence rumor spreading, we explore the socio-technological features of mobile media at both micro and macro levels. On the macro level, as Winner advocates, "what matters is not the technology itself, but the social or economic system in which it is embedded" (Winner 1986: 20). Mobile technology's embedding in Chinese social systems—and the propaganda system in particular—makes it hard for the government to shut down telecommunication service to prevent the spread of a rumor. Also, unpredictable, rapid, spontaneous diffusion of a rumor via mobile communication often leaves a government unprepared. On the micro level, individual mobile user reflexively engages in the "domestication" (Berker et al. 2006) of new technologies during rumor spreading. The mutual visibility during mobile communication nurtures shared awareness (Shirky 2011) and further encourages both sides to act towards a "mutual recognized engagement" (Ling 2008: xi) in circulation of the rumor. At the same time, new anti-censorship schemes are emerging at a dramatic rate, offering Chinese mobile phone users a way to disseminate a rumor despite censorship. In practice, the so-

cio-technological features of mobile media in China complicate the government's efforts to control rumors.

The embedding of mobile communication in social systems

As mobile phone use penetrates into people's everyday lives, the traditional or conventional communication-control methods sometimes become ineffective or may even backfire in the face of mobile communication. Undoubtedly, government can, by use of its monopoly powers, markedly reduce the speed at which a rumor spreads even in this information age. Specifically referring to control over digital media, the Party's propaganda machine is able to block websites, shut down online forums, and even cut off Internet service[8] in order to stop online rumor from spreading. However, Chinese governmental authority finds it difficult to take the same approach (just shutting down service) with mobile telephones, even though the Party has already realized that cutting off service is the most effective means for controlling mobile phone-mediated rumors (Branigan 2012; Reuters 2012). The difficulty of enforcement is accentuated by the fact that, on the one hand, "officials, themselves, have as much motive to contact each other through mobile service as have ordinary citizens."[9] In the case of Xiamen, for instance, local government was forced to restore the telecommunication network after a two-hour, rumor-suppression shutdown because "lots

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[8] For instance, the shutdown of Internet service after the 2009 Xinjiang riots, see (Anonymous 2010, Radio Free Asia 2011). The tight control of Internet and mobile phone service ahead of the annual Chinese parliamentary session, see (Reuters 2012).

[9] Interview with a 28-year-old civil servant at the propaganda department, Fujian province, April 2011.

of government agencies complained that they could not work without tele-communication services."[10]

Meantime, as part of the e-governance service, the government relies on the telecommunication network to "spread propaganda messages debunking rumor."[11] To cut off mobile phone service as a result is a means that not only pays a political price (impeding government's propaganda campaigns against rumor), but also easily gets authorities into larger trouble (interfering with people's daily activities at work and so on). Against this backdrop, mobile communication has become an effective way, at least to local residents, to circumvent local government's politically motivated crackdown on telecommunication, particularly shutdowns of internet service.

Communication instantaneousness and rapid diffusion

The accessibility of mobile technology—including perpetual contact, synchronous communication, and group texting—allows the diffusion of rumor to occur rapidly (Jensen 2010: 71-72; Katz and Aakhus 2002; Ling 2004; Ling and Campbell 2009). As a uniquely easy-to-use and instant communication device, the mobile phone allows users to get in touch with each other, but also to receive and relay rumors, at the flick of a button. Additionally, low-cost mass texting services offer a cheap way to distribute messages (rumors) on a large scale, which accordingly brings rumors into the open for a short time.

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[10] Interview with a 29-year-old civil servant in Xiamen, December 2010,.

[11] Interview with a 28-year-old civil servant at the propaganda department, Fujian province, April 2011. Also see (Lai 2010).

As an example, let us take a look at the spreading of rumor via mobile phone in Xiangshui. The rumor that a chemical explosion was going to happen soon was getting around in the middle of the night in a village where "most residents were sleeping" (Lin 2011). At the same time, a huge snow was falling. This is hardly a context conducive to the spread of information, no matter news or rumor, through any traditional medium or even the Internet. However, it was through mobile phones that the rumor went rampant within two hours and then drove over 10,000 residents of four townships to swarm onto the streets (Yu 2010). People received mobile calls at midnight from relatives, friends, and colleagues, which urged them "to run quickly for your life! The chemical factory nearby is going to explode!" The calls also urged that "to warn the people around [you] as soon as possible.'"[12] Residents fled with others and, just as importantly, "called their family members" and "sent group messages."[13] Local mobile networks crashed due to server overload; thousands of people were sending and receiving calls and text messages to warn their family members and friends[14] (Lin 2011).

This communication instantaneousness and rapid diffusion give mobile phone-mediated rumors an unpredictable nature. It is nearly impossible to predict when, where, and to what extent a mobile phone-mediated rumor is going to erupt. Even with the ability to detect and refute rumors, governmental authority still lacks the strength and resources to exercise

[12] Interview with 48-year-old doctor, Jiangsu Province, February 2011,.

[13] Interview with 22-year-old university student from Jiangsu, Fujian, February 2011.

[14] Interviews residents in Xiangshui, Jiangsu Province, February 2011.

control over both the emergence and persistence of rumors. For instance, in Zhengcheng, even though security personnel were patrolling the streets and had ordered local residents to stay in their homes overnight, a rumor still broke out "like a storm"[15] at 3 a.m. about the poor couple who were victims of *chengguan* brutality. Thanks to the rapid diffusion of mobile phone-mediated rumors, both preventing the outbreak and stemming the flow of rumor are incredibly difficult to attain.

Mutual visibility and shared awareness

Another key characteristic of mobile phone-mediated rumor is mutual visibility on both sides. This means that the communicators—both sender and receiver—know that the other has already involved himself in the process of communication and, more importantly, in the unfolding of events.

Mutual visibility introduces *guanxi,* a commitment to relationship in China, into the communication process of mobile phone use. The *guanxi*-embedded mobile communication in turn, as I mentioned elsewhere (Liu 2010), increases both the likelihood of sharing messages and the perceived credibility of the information, even for rumor. For instance, the people interviewed say that they would trust information from their mobile social network, even if "the senders do not have enough knowledge about the topic."[16] Also, 13 of 15 say that they would pass the message on to

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[15] Interview with 32-year-old journalist, Guangdong Province, June 2011,.

[16] Interviews residents in Xiamen, May and June, 2007, and September, 2010.

people in their mobile social network. As several interviewees explain, "if the message is important to me, it becomes important to my friends."[17]

More importantly, mutual visibility creates a foundation of consensus, which increases the likelihood of engagement. To be specific, mutual visibility not only includes identity verification (Who sent me this message? Whom shall I send messages to? Why?), but also increases an individual's awareness, understanding, and sense of safety and security in engagement by creating the perception of *concrete* support from a mobile social network (e.g., who is helping/will help me spread the message?) (Ling 2004, 2008). Accordingly, the mutual visibility of mobile communication creates a shared awareness of shared actions. As Shirky (2011) paraphrases from the military, shared awareness refers to "the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too." In the case of a rumor spreading through mobile phone communication, it is not just that "I hear a rumor" or that "I know that other people hear the rumor as well," but that "I know that the people I know [such as intimates, colleagues, and so on] will forward the rumor." To put it differently, mobile communication facilitates the understanding that our situational awareness is shared by the people we know, who are also aware they are not alone in their situational awareness. This kind of shared awareness shapes people's thoughts and feelings, greatly encouraging them to join the "mutual recognized engagement" (Ling 2008: xi) by talking about and spreading the mobile phone-mediated rumor. In sum, spontaneous engagement happens in a concrete,

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[17] Interviews residents in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, February 2010.

collaborative relationship based on security with a high degree of trust, reliability, and shared awareness between both parties. Mutual visibility is key, as people are more likely to engage in a behavior or an event if they see many others they know doing it.

Censor-evading rhetoric

Finally, people are turning to rhetoric's power to help them break through government keyword blocking and censorship filters in order to deliver rumors and other vital information through mobile phone services and the Internet. For instance, where references to Xiamen or Dalian -- the names of the two cities where anti-PX demonstrations broke out -- are banned, mobile and Internet users make up their own acronyms (e.g., XM for Xiamen and DL for Dalian) to evade the censors. "Stroll" (*san bu*) and "shopping" (*gouwu*) have emerged as alternatives to both "demonstration" and "protest." Even aware of these censor-evading or hidden meanings sent through the internet and mobile phones, officials can hardly ban them because, as He points out, "it is impossible to ban the arbitrary combinations of characters, which can be done or changed in a flash of time, unless all characters are banned" (2008: 188).

In short, as Yu (2011) states:

"[t]o evade censorship when expressing their opinions…, Chinese people give full rein to the rhetorical functions of language, elevating to a sublime level both innuendo and metaphor, parody and hyperbole, conveying sarcasm and scorn through veiled gibes and wily indirection."

As censorship increases, the interest to push back against government-backed censorship grows even higher. The Chinese have become adept at getting past censorship by various means.

MOBILE PHONE-MEDIATED RUMOR AS RESISTANCE

In his study of SMS in China, He (2008: 182) reveals that SMS has flourished to become "a major carrier of the nonofficial discourse universe," when "the official universe occupies all the public spaces of expression, especially the Party-/state-controlled mass media…." As this study reveals, rumor communication through the mobile phone emerges as a further form of counter-power/counter-authority at the grassroots level—against not just information censorship, but most importantly, communication control and political manipulation by authorities, instead of a kind of unofficial communication to reduce collective anxiety. The emergence of rumors further displays a deep-seated distrust of authorities. "Resistance identity," or "identity for resistance" (Castells 2010: 8-9), has been generated then, through mobile phone-mediated rumor circulation, by people who are in position of being "devalued" or "stigmatized" as "the many being ignorant of the truth" in official rhetoric. Rumor communication via mobile phones turns into a kind of "weapons of the weak" against authorities.

Mobile phone-mediated rumor and citizen disobediences

Both feelings of distrust toward authorities and resistance against government's information censorship and communication control form the necessary basis of rumor activity.

As several studies point out, rumor seems to thrive where there is a dearth of trust towards formal sources of information (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007a: 201; Shibutani 1966). In other words, people compensate with informal speculation, or even rumor, when they distrust formal news sources. The situation is even worse in China. Government censorship leaves people a high degree of suspicion and distrust toward authorities. Accordingly, there is an ingrained belief among people that "government would never have censored information had they not had anything to hide or refuse in the first place" (Bai 2010: 93). Some people even thought that censorship sometimes simply comes with an aim of "maintaining stability" (*weiwen*) (Zhang, 2008). Consequently, people would "simply believe in the rumor, rather than government's words" generally (Yiyin 2011). This significant distrust constitutes a fertile constituency for rumor.

Meantime, "to circulate [this rumor]" has been widely accepted as a clear signal of expressing people's grievances against government's heavy-handed information monopoly and communication suppression.

On the one hand, breaking the silence of government and mass media—as in the cases of earthquake and chemical explosion—mobile phone-mediated rumors demonstrate people's discontent with propaganda stories and lack of transparency in institutional channels. According to *China Youth Daily*'s survey, 73.1% of people attribute the proliferation of rumor to lack of transparency of authorities (Xiang 2011). As one complains in the earthquake case, "there is no any announcement or explana-

tion at all on why these drills had been carried out"[18] when local residents suffered from emotional tension due to fear of earthquake.

"We cannot help discussing that why government and local media remain silent," adds another interviewee. "There is a widespread belief that government intentionally hides information about earthquakes because they fear triggering public panic from earthquake prediction."[19]

The exact same situation has been observed in the chemical explosion rumor case. Social discontent has never eased even after governmental rumor denial. It is also because the denial and even demonization of rumor coincide with a too-broad use of this term by authorities for the sake of being in power. For Chinese people, therefore, rumor accusations and denials act normally as reinforcements for already existing censorship. Fear and anxiety therefore aggravate through these mobile phone-mediated rumors, while both discontent against and anger towards authorities intensify.

On the other hand, rumor communication via mobile phones express people's resistance and an activism against government rarely seen when government attempts to suppress popular discussions and opinion in the name of diminishing "rumor." In other words, mobile phone-mediated rumors afford a relevant outlet for the growing public discontent with authorities' adoption of repressive approaches towards "rumor" to suppress ordinary communicative activity. As in the case with anti-PX pictures,

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[18] Telephone interview with 35-year-old civil servant, March 2010.

[19] Telephone interview with 54-year-old worker in Fujian, October 2010.

residents have carried on circulating rumor via their mobile phones regardless of being cautioned by official authorities.

"So-called 'rumor' is just another excuse for the government to censor the PX information and, in particular, ban debate. They think people would not dare to argue and protest, or even to talk about this issue once authorities label it as 'rumor', let alone argue and protest against it. Because then they [the authorities] can easily eradicate different points of view by political charges, such as fabrication or distortion of facts to interfere with social and political order." One argues[20], "see the charge of so-called 'rumormonger' on Professor Zhao Yufen. That is a living example."

The last statement in particular shows that the interviewee attempts to treat the rumor accusation as a kind of "political persecution" from authorities. As a result, the more vehemently refutation comes out, the more people tend to believe and circulate rumor, and the more fiercely those rumors reignite. In sum, people spread and trust rumors because they believe that "too much information is currently hushed up by government," or authorities attempt to prevent people from communicating with each other in the name of "rumor spreading." People's gullibility and reliance on mobile phone-mediated rumors stem from the government's own failure of transparency and credibility. Their effort to break through the barriers of censorship and to find the truth has snowballed through the dissemination of rumor via mobile device.

"Resistance identity" in rumor communication

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[20] Interview with 28-year-old university student in Xiamen, October 2010.

The aggressive activism against official refutation and demonization of rumor has revealed the counter-authority initiative, or "a counter-power" (Kapferer 1990: 14), in particular behind the proliferation of mobile phone-mediated rumor. To be specific, it is of interest that not only the large majority of interviewees ever have an experience on the phenomenon that rumor messages are out in force after government and mass media deny it, but also about half of interviewees agree they "will continue to pass on those messages after governments toss out the accusation of 'rumor'."[21] In other words, the [vigorous] accusations and denials from authorities to blast rumor can be counter-productive, undermining their motivation and legitimacy to stop rumor but actually inflating rumor instead. The dynamic driving the phenomenon of rumor flooding is the construction and expression of "resistance identity" by and of mobile phone users.

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

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

Whereas Castells uses this concept to describe, in principle, "forms of collective resistance against otherwise *unbearable oppression* [emphasis

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[21] Interviews with residents in Xiamen and Beijing, October 2010.

added],” he limits his examples within those “usually” excluded or op-pressed identities which are defined by “history, geography, or biology” (Castells 2010: 9). This approach fails to take into account the reality of the complex, ever-changing strategy of exclusion and oppression in differ-ent contexts. Instead, in the case of rumor in China, the repeated allegation of reactionary (“ulterior motives”) and irrational (“ignorant of the truth”) motivations in official rhetoric grows into a specific kind of “unbearable oppression,” which in turn galvanizes citizens into forwarding rumor via their mobile devices as a resistant action. To be precise, this is the re-sistance that against government’s very label of “the many [as] being igno-rant of the truth” that has been a prime motivation to spread rumor via mo-bile communication in general. As one interviewee argues:

> “…people are ‘irrational’ and ‘ignorant of the truth’ only because they feel worried about their living environment and try to figure out the truth. On the contrary, people are ‘rational’ when they obey the rules and do not question government. What kind of logic is that? We definitely know the truth! We are not ‘the many being ignorant of the truth’!”[22]

The charges of “rumormonger” and “the many being ignorant of the truth” therefore have been widely regarded as inferior excuses for the government “not to take the responsibility of related public panic,” “to ban people’s discussion on hidden danger,” or “to forbid people’s opposition [against government’s decision].”[23] People spontaneously and actively join

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[22] Interviews with residents in Xiamen, Shanghai, Beijing and Shanxi, 2010.

[23] Telephone interviews with residents in Taiyuan, Yuci, Yuncheng, Shanxi prov-ince, March 2011.

the camp in slamming arbitrary government action through disseminating rumor via the mobile phone, building their "resistance identities" to express their discontents and anger towards dominant discourse.

It is worth to note that the resistance identity accompanied by rumor communication is a *temporary* identity in a specific context. To be specific, people build up this *reactive* type of resistance identity that points strongly towards government's allegations rather than the dominant ideology. Although it is to a large extent against the logic of domination, this kind of resistance identity will collapse soon after the event, with which it affiliated is over. Moreover, because of its transient nature, the resistance identity accompanied by rumor communication would hardly transform to, as Castells (2010: 8) proposes, a legitimizing one. As a result, one observes that the proliferation of rumors via mobile communication is more or less event-driven, which accordingly restricts its long-run impact on Chinese society.

Mobile phone-mediated rumor as an emerging form of public resistance

Nevertheless, mobile phone-mediated rumor still emerges as a new form of resistance in particular for those people without strong technological skills. To be specific, after finding it impossible to restrain information flow in the new-media era, Chinese government and its dedicated censors attempt to defend their controls over information and communication as a move to eliminate rumormongers or the spread of rumor. Accordingly, the dominant ruler tries to impose its own definition of "rumor" and "rumormongers," not only on the behavior of subordinate classes, but on their consciousness as well. That is what Scott warns, "the critical implication for hegemony is that class rule is effected not so much by sanctions and

coercion as by the consent and passive compliance of subordinate classes"
(Scott 1985: 315-316). The official assertion and accusation aims to not
just obliterate rumors, but to deprive people of their legitimate rights to
free speech and information flow, and further to silence people's com-
ments, doubts, questions and inquiries towards "the official story" by es-
tablishing deterrence. In this context, to circulate rumors via mobile
phones also becomes a simple, but basic way for each person to show
his\her suspicions, distrust and challenges toward the dominant public
sphere and its hegemonic discourse. Obviously, this action displays a ges-
ture of political confrontation against a government call that: "[people
should] not trust rumors, not spread rumors, and not give rumormongers
with ulterior motives more room to operate" (Ren 2011) on the one hand,
and violates law and regulation laid out by the government on the other.
Additionally, in citizens' minds, the more people join the dissemination of
rumors, the louder the clamor of those unjustly oppressed grows. In other
words, the aim of circulating of rumor via mobile devices is not just to re-
veal the truth, which has been covered-up (e.g. unusual death), or to em-
barrass those individuals or institutions (e.g. local government) in power,
but to mobilize citizens to bring about a different functioning of communi-
cation sphere that might reach beyond the limits of the dominant official
public sphere (Zhao 2009). Benefitting from the low-cost and user-friendly
operation, people with all levels of literacy have been empowered by their
mobile phone—a familiar communication technology, to employ as a
means of resistance. It lowers the average protest threshold—protest does
not always mean to organize or join a demonstration—you just move your
finger to send or forward those messages asserted as "rumors" by govern-
ment.

Under this circumstance, in particular, people seize the opportunity of snowballing "rumor" to voice their dissatisfaction and vent their fury over a government response. Receivers find a ton of motivation from this sentence to pass on these kinds of chain messages countering authorities. The terminology of "rumor" there differs in that it can be in some ways a call to arms, or more precisely a call on people not to remain inaction, as a protest of current conditions and as a weapon to puncture the veil surrounding censorship as well as to break the control over communication. In other words, "rumor" here is mostly symbolic but highlights its growing presence as a sort of resistance power, antagonistic sentiments, and, increasingly, as a strategy of struggle to facilitate communication outside official channels. It is in this sense that the mobile phone-mediated rumor becomes a key part of "everyday resistance" at the grassroots level. It challenges power by "challenging the normal channels of challenging power and revealing the truth" (Žižek 2011: 10).

CONCLUSION

Considering how prevalent new media rumors are in Chinese society today, there is a dearth of research on how these rumors thrive and why people spread them. This paper considers the characteristics and nature of rumor with a special focus on rumor through mobile phone. It goes beyond simply demonizing the rumor as "a subjective and deliberate fabrication" as do government and mass media in contemporary China. By carefully analyzing its dissemination, interpretation and implication in our cases, this paper observes that the rumor via mobile phones has evolved into a special form of resistance at the grassroots level.

With the click of a button people disseminate rumors through a mobile phone, whereby they show their suspicions, distrust and challenges toward government, or involve themselves in revolts against authorities Mobile phone-mediated rumor thus lowers the average protest threshold and gives vent to long pent-up resentments of entrenched authoritarian regime. Most importantly, it brings an unprecedented opportunity for people, especially those without complicated communication skills, to raise their own voices, resist and disregard authorities' orders, to show their disobedient attitudes, and to carry out uncooperative activities. Meantime, communication on mobile phones happens in a close-knit network where everyone knows everyone else. The engagements of someone you already know greatly increase both the credibility of messages and the sense of security for participation. Last but not least, the prevalence of mobile devices and synchronous mobile communication accumulates rumor discourse into large-scale resistance over a very short time. All of these variables bring mobile phone-mediated rumor to implement a crucial impact on contemporary Chinese society. The emergence, circulation and proliferation of rumors via mobile communication, while to certain extent leading to panics and mass incidents, serve to undermine the legitimacy of the regime. In particular, the diffusion of rumors accumulates a power of resistance against the official hegemonic discourse and control of communications, including the use of the accusation of "rumor" to stifle any different voices and ordinary communicative activities. Mobile communication is perceived as the only platform on which people can express and share their opinions, while, to a degree, interacting with each other without government control. Mobile phone-mediated rumor thus cultivates the political affordances of mobile media as a vehicle of both empowerment and mobilization for grassroots.

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