

Mobile phones have given the Chinese a voice

March 8 2013

Mobile technology has provided the Chinese with an opportunity to voice individual and collective popular protests. And with over 1 billion mobile subscribers in China, the voices are heard. A new PhD thesis from the University of Copenhagen presents several case studies on the use of the mobile phone for political participation in Chinese society and points to the concept of *guanxi* – an individual's network of social relations and obligations– as central to understanding the success of alternative mobile communication in China.

In 2007, in the city of Xiamen in southeast China, authorities were forced to relocate a chemical plant because of popular protests that were initiated and coordinated largely by text messaging. And according to PhD Jun Liu of the University of Copenhagen, who has recently defended his PhD thesis "Mobilized by [Mobile Media](#). How Chinese People use mobile phones to change politics and democracy", this is merely one of many recent examples of the way in which mobile phones influence [Chinese society](#) and provide the 'communication have-nots' with a voice.

"As early as in 2003, the mobile phone played a vital role when people shared information about the SARS epidemic that the government tried to suppress. And the mobile phone has become even more significant since then because virtually everybody has one today; not only is the mobile phone inexpensive, it is also easy to use and thus allows citizens to express their discontent and organise individual and collective resistance to the party's authority just by sending a text message," says Jun Liu from the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication.

A guanxi-message can be trusted and forwarded

According to Jun Liu, what makes illicit mobile communication possible in an otherwise highly regulated society is, first, that the [Chinese authorities](#) find it increasingly difficult to cut off mobile communication; government officials themselves rely on [mobile services](#) in their daily work and integrate mobile devices into their propaganda system. The concept of guanxi, second, guarantees that the information a person receives from his network is reliable and can be forwarded to other members of the network.

"Surprisingly few studies on mobile communication in China have addressed guanxi which is inextricably part of Chinese society; technology and cultural practices are not separate entities, but influence each other," Jun Liu points out.

"Guanxi is essentially the sum of an individual's personal connections, and all these connections are bound together by, among other things, obligations, favours, and personal trust. In the case of [mobile communication](#) e.g., a text message received from a member of one's guanxi is considered trustworthy and will be passed on to other members of the network if required because of the reciprocal nature of guanxi; a message with contentious content can therefore be distributed widely in a very short time. And the government can do very little about it," Jun Liu concludes.

More information: Jun Liu defended his thesis "Mobilized by Mobile Media. How Chinese People use mobile phones to change politics and democracy" on 11 February 2013 at the University of Copenhagen.

Provided by University of Copenhagen

Citation: Mobile phones have given the Chinese a voice (2013, March 8) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-03-mobile-chinese-voice.html>

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