When Technological Closeness Begets Social Distancing: From Mobile Phones to Wired Radio and a Yearning for the Mass Line in Rural China

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Listening does not relate to improved communications in the way peasants are included in China's digital leap forward. Despite having access to cutting-edge communication technologies, the rural participants of this research find themselves with limited means to be involved in the politics of their village. Hungry for information relevant to participation, local calls for the reinstatement of wired radio and regular meetings in the village of Heyang are informed by memories of Maoist mass line politics. Combining historical analysis with ethnographic fieldwork and reflective listening, this article explores how peasants see discursive engagement as the best means to realize their interests.

Keywords: distance, listening, orality, mass line, wired radio

Marshall McLuhan argues that the electronic communication technologies connecting the diverse regions of the world are providing the basis for a "global village"—bringing all of us into a close communicative space (McLuhan & Powers, 1989). Whereas McLuhan warns against the social frictions this closeness might cause, Ramonet (1997) argues that the dominant practice since has been to celebrate the technology underlying globalization. Given the urban-centric basis of globalization (Dirlik & Prazniak, 2012), we are left to ask what impact this expansion has on rural communication needs, and what measures are most appropriate to make sure that rural voices are not lost in the development of their communities. This problem has largely been framed as a digital divide that must be overcome by providing access to technology and different media literacies (see Castells, 2006; van Dijk, 2002). Indeed, in recent years, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has primarily premised access when addressing rural communication (Harwit, 2004; Oreglia, 2015; Zhao, 2007).

However, as Yuezhi Zhao (2007) argues—building off the work of Dallas Smythe (1981)—technocentric development models, contextualized by the imperative of capitalist globalization, are not reducing, but reproducing urban–rural social divisions. In an effort to continue the line of analysis in Zhao's question, "After mobile phones, what?" I brought the question "How are rural voices fairing in

globalization?" to the residents of a remote village in the prosperous southeastern province of Zhejiang, China. Heyang Village, located in the mountainous region of Jinyun County, represents the porous boundaries of globalization: Just as its leaders are increasing the promotion of its cultural relics for global tourism (Nicolai; Qian, this Special Section), and its residents are engaged in national popular activities from square dancing to discussing current affairs involving Hong Kong (Chao; Kong, this Special Section), these villagers are also struggling to realize a good life in their rural setting (Zhang, this Special Section).

From June 26 to July 13, 2015, I joined researchers whose work composes this Special Section, taking part in a group interview with local officials who were from Heyang, but were no longer regular village residents and 10 group interviews with village residents. These interviews included more than 94 adults recruited through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball methods, with an initial list of 42 participants who were selected in partnership with the village council to have a base representation of different genders, ages, and educational backgrounds. Reflecting the general hollowing out of China's villages, most participants were older than 40 years old, as many younger peasants have left to work in the city. In addition, although some had been to college, many had attended only elementary or middle school. Supplementing these interviews, I conducted my own participant observation research to observe media access and use.

Previous studies have investigated how recent developments in rural communication technology have accentuated existing power relations in terms of class differences (Guo & Peng, 2011) and urban–rural differences (Oreglia, 2013) in terms of access to technology, as well as gendered entrepreneurial advantage in the use of technology (Wallis, 2015). Likewise, the participants in this research demonstrate how new technologies are accentuating political power imbalances between peasants and village leaders.

From the participants, I learned that although in the technological closeness of globalization they have access to a whole new wealth of entertainment and information, they are struggling with a shift away from past political practices that kept them locally informed and empowered to participate in village politics. This is because as new communication technologies have become increasingly prevalent, their content has shifted away from local affairs. This first occurred with village news no longer propagated over a local radio system and with access to county television becoming restrictively expensive as a result of digitization. This changed media environment corresponds with a political shift in which local leaders have become less inclined to involve villagers in collective decision making and policy implementation as peasants have become reified as uninformed.

At the center of this issue is what Dreher (2010) identifies as "the politics of listening." In studying how Australian aboriginals have gained contemporary communication technologies, she argues that they are still struggling to be heard and interpreted on their own terms. Such difficulties are explained with the social justice concerns that Fricker (2003) distinguishes as testimonial injustice, not to be heard because of one's social status (i.e., a "backwards" peasant), and hermeneutic injustice, not to be heard because audiences benefiting from the status quo (e.g., government officials and business elites) have marginalized the speakers' ways of knowing to the point of neglect and misunderstanding (see Dirlik & Prazniak, 2012).

Canadian scholar Harold Innis's (1971) theory of media bias, that the material properties and social use of a technology can enable messages to either last through time (i.e., local knowledge that remains consistent over time) or move across space (i.e., knowledge that is spread far and wide, but is subject to regular change), serves as a means of addressing how local knowledge can be devalued by the technologies that have enabled the global village. He argues that under the conditions of commercialization, technologies biased toward the control of space enable the centralization of both economic power and epistemic influence, which contributes to the social distancing found in Fricker's (2003) concern with testimonial injustice. Innis (2007) suggests that oral culture can serve as a means to counteract this injustice, and defines oral engagements as "inherently involv[ing] personal contact and a consideration for the feelings of others" (p. 26), which serves to disrupt the conditions of hermeneutic injustice. It is this consideration that underscores the importance that peasants in Heyang associate with the regular meetings they had under Maoist leadership. Under this system, known as the *mass line*, leaders were guided to engage peasants and actively listen to their concerns to realize policy objectives. This method of political involvement has often been interpreted as authoritarian (see Smythe, 1981; Zhao, 1998), but Blecher (1983) identifies how it contributed to a sense of equality and intimacy in rural communities. We can find the legacies of Blecher's interpretation of the mass line in peasants' identification of their interests with the continuation of the CPC's appeals to socialist ideals (Zhao, 2007, 2011).

To address the politics of listening head on, I begin with a practice of reflexive listening: laying out my positionality by reflecting on how media changes in my personal experience of growing up in Canada might correspond and contrast with that experienced in Heyang. The basis for comparison is primarily founded in how community media, meant to provide local content produced by local people, have had to struggle against technological and social organizational changes. The reflection works to demonstrate how the problems experienced in China are not unique to this one village or country, but have been experienced by rural and periphery communities even in so-called developed countries such as Canada. It also serves as a means to set up how different historical contexts can lead to divergent definitions of a shared problem and different solutions.

The majority of this article is dedicated to following the development of communication technologies and practices that both empower peasants' access to local news, enabling them to participate in local politics, and those that hinder such access and empowerment. I intermix academic interpretations with the memories of participants to give value to rural experiences and to contextualize their proposed solutions. In this manner, my research, as part of Zhao's larger project, aims to respond to her call for not only more rural voices in communication research in China but also a reshaping of Chinese communication research from an urban to a rural perspective by attending to the historical practices and subjectivity of China's (still) vastly rural population (Zhao, as quoted in Shao, 2015; also see Oreglia et al., 2015).

Traversing Distances: Reflexive and Reflective Positioning

As a university-supported researcher from Canada with institutional resources to travel, I entered Heyang from a privileged position. Reflexively addressing this privilege, I have worked to reduce the conceptual distance between my original research goals, which were to identify innovative uses of new

technologies, and the interests expressed by Heyang residents. Their responses transformed my project from a focus on new technology to wired radio, and from there, to local memories of how revolutionary mass line politics empower peasants.

Reflecting on my personal experience, I should have been more prepared for the critique that what matters for social empowerment is not access to technology, but "the social organization and control of technology" (Lerner & Schramm, 1967, p. 89) that Pimlott (2002) shows with reference to community television in Canada and more notable Canadian communication scholars such as Innis (1995a, 2007), Smythe (1981), and Zhao (1998, 2000, 2007) have argued in other contexts.

From the 1970s, Canada's national regulator, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), required private broadcasters to run a community television station that would train community members to use broadcasting technology and enable them to produce content (Ali, 2012). Responding to private lobbying, the CRTC ended its community station requirement in 1997, contributing to a general professionalization and corporatization of community television under private operators (Ali, 2012). This enabled Shaw-TV, the corporate cable television provider in my hometown of Surrey, British Columbia, to drastically cut community programming in 2000. I experienced this shift in ownership and service provision as a volunteer involved in community productions in Surrey, British Columbia. I, like many others working at this station, lost work under a directive replacing volunteer-based productions with shows primarily produced by paid staff. Shaw-TV's process of reshaping the community station to fit its corporation's centralized operations was a major blow to community involvement in production and consumption of local content (Edwards, 2010, quoted in Skinner, 2015). From my own experience, this shift actively reduced the choices available to those with financial, educational, and health barriers to participate in the increasingly commercialized access to, and making of, their communities. As a result of public hearings in 2002 and 2010, the CRTC has gradually returned these means of broadcasting to community productions (Ali, 2012).

This battle between the centralization and localization of media production in Canada continues today. CRTC hearings in 2016 saw rural communities asking the national government for financial resources to sustain local news producers as they struggle against competition from Internet news providers, which offer daily updates on global events, but neglect sustained reports on local issues (CRTC, 2016).

What I was not prepared for when I first encountered Heyang, largely as a result of my education in the mainstream information technology for development literature, is that these events in Canada have parallels with the situation in Heyang. Here, Mao's revolutionary mass line inspired the nation's first dissemination and use of electronic technology: *wired radio*. As formulated by Mao in the phrase "from the masses, to the masses" (Mao, 1965c, p. 118), the mass line was a means for the CPC to remain connected to the struggles faced by the people and to include them in efforts to address recognized problems. Wired radio, with low literacy and economic barriers (Bishop, 1989), was a primary way for the CPC to inform and agitate China's peasantry under this directive. In addition, in its original organization with radio monitors, who would engage peasants in discussion after particular broadcasts, wired radio represented an important means for the government to listen to the people (Liu, 1964). As politics changed after Mao's death, developments in communication infrastructure have moved away from Mao's

revolutionary mass line (Robinson, 1981). Now, national strategies for communication are largely oriented to interests based on consolidating markets for global competition (Starks, 2010; Zhao, 2004), aestheticizing development as the image of material access in opposition to political structures of inclusion (Zhao, 2000, 2007).

Whereas Canadians are seeking media made by and for the community, residents in Heyang are struggling for a local communication platform to reconnect them with the government. Linking these Canadian and Chinese experiences is a basic narrative of centralized capitalistic interests attempting to consolidate broadcasting at regional and national levels at the expense of local community cohesion and social justice. Both stories depict how people on the periphery, be they from a constitutional liberal democracy or a postrevolutionary state, see the national government as a discursive partner able to help realize and protect local interests.

Constructing Distance: Interpreting the Place of Wired Radio in China's Countryside

The CPC's initial use of communication technology for development was wired radio. Experimented with in Yenan, it was not until 1955 that the CPC encouraged the national spread of rural wired radio (Lin, 1978). In the early days, those who served as radio monitors (party members who reported to the CPC's propaganda departments) would memorize transmissions and go to villages, which did not have access to radio, to disseminate the messages (Liu, 1964). Monitors would collect work teams to listen together and then lead meetings to collect peasants' feedback, which the monitors were tasked to send to policy makers (Liu, 1964).

The dissemination of wired radio itself was premised on local self-reliance, with the CPC's central propaganda department encouraging local party organizations to work with local levels of government to set up diffusion stations (Yu, 1964). This development was realized through "mass line applied to the economic front" (Berger, as quoted in Galtung, 1976, p. 207) in that there was an emphasis of relying on local conditions, with instructions on how to make speaker systems from material available in villages, requiring local funding for the setup and local labor for ongoing maintenance and management (Chang, 1989). These stations generally consisted of a wireless receiver or tape player, using telephone wires to pipe broadcasts to loudspeakers, placed both outdoors and inside people's homes. The number of stations and speakers rose fairly continuously in China during the Maoist era. By 1982, there were approximately 22 million relay stations (Howkins, as cited in Bishop, 1989). Largely premised on rebroadcasting central transmissions, Howkins estimates that 1,500 to 2,500 of the 22 million stations were county stations (as cited in Bishop, 1989) capable of originating their own content. At a minimum, this included providing local interpretations of national broadcasts and repeating information in local dialects (Liu, 1964).

Jinyun County's adoption of wired radio serves as a key example of this early development and localization of content. In 1955, immediately following the national policy encouraging the rural spread of stations, the county set up its radio station and installed 320 speakers (Ji, Pan, Ye, Fang, & Liang, 2016). The number of speakers in the county and surrounding villages grew quickly throughout the 1960s and 1970s; during this time, more wired radio stations opened up at the village level (Ji et al., 2016). Whereas

most of these simply relayed broadcasts from the county station, the one in Heyang, at least, was able to add its own content in addition to rebroadcasting transmissions.

This localization can be interpreted as a means of balancing the space bias that Innis (1971) read into radio. Rather than simply being a means of national integration, these local stations served as a means of affirming the importance of local conditions and knowledge. The issue of localization, however, is often neglected in the English-language literature on China's use of wired radio, which instead emphasizes how the medium enabled centralized dissemination of authorized content for the CPC. Much of the early research focused on coercive listening conditions and interpreted political messages as dull and ineffective (Houn, 1956; Liu, 1964; Yu, 1964). Less provocative accounts from a developmentalist point of view (Bishop, 1989; Chang, 1989; Lin, 1978) highlight the historic importance of radio as the first electronic communication medium covering the population. These authors' emphasis on the importance of entertainment over political content, however, naturalizes postreform shifts to entertainment-based programming that were motivated by commercial interests (Robinson, 1981).

Respondents in Heyang met the Cold War interpretation of wired radio communication as a tool of dulling oppression with incredulity. Mr. Yen,[2] in his 60s, retorted, "Mao Zedong thought was important at that time." Ms. Hong, in her 50s, made the point, "At that time there was nothing else to listen to . . . only the Communist Party and we . . . wanted to follow the Communist Party anyway." Most residents were largely ambivalent about what they remember hearing on the radio. Many highlighted how broadcasts would play only three times a day and were used as a village timepiece. Ms. Hong claimed, "In the morning we would listen to the radio when we went to work." She explained, "We could hear the radio from the fields . . . [and] knew when it was time to return home to cook." Depicting its value as a localized medium, respondents discussed wired radio in terms of its ability to organize people for village affairs and projects (for similar accounts, see Han, 2009; Sun, 2006, regarding village television).

Capital Opening the Door to Distance

The CPC's reform era "four-level" media policy, which enabled each main level of government structure in China (national, provincial, municipal, and county) to construct broadcasting stations, continued the party's original encouragement of local authorities to invest in their own resources in broadcasting stations. Rather than being paid for and maintained solely through local government coffers, advertisements were introduced as a means to sustain media broadcasting (Zhao & Guo, 2005). The result was a rapid expansion of local television stations, which focused on producing entertainment over political content (Zhao & Guo, 2005). This shift from a socialist political imperative and means to a commercial market rational for the dissemination of media has not led to more local involvement and content. Zhao and Guo (2005) describe how the success of the rapid development of infrastructure and local television content led to competition for political oversight from the national administrator, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, and for advertisement revenue from CCTV, the national broadcaster. Subsequently, the state pushed for the curtailment of local programming at the county level, pressuring counties to serve as relaying stations. Wusan Sun (2006), however, found that although

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[2] All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

national policies were set up in 2001 to restrict the amount of local programs to two hours a day, these policies were neither fully adhered to nor strictly enforced.

Unlike wired radio, television broadcasting took a longer time to take root in Jinyun. A satellite ground station rebroadcasting CCTV 1 and CCTV 2 was built in the nearby city of Lishui in 1989 to supplement the provincial terrestrial broadcasts, and a local station did not open in Jinyun until 1998 (Ji et al., 2016). The expansion of cable television to neighboring villages throughout the 1990s impacted wired radio. The original telephone wiring of the speakers shifted to the use of television's coaxial cables, and previously installed wooden speakers were exchanged with small plastic speakers featuring a volume control for a fee of 30 RMB (see Figure 1). Despite such commitments to the continuation of the past infrastructure, the rise of television saw the fall of wired radio as the number of speakers first began to decline in the 1990s (Ji et al., 2016).

Figure 1. A plastic speaker in an inner courtyard. Photo by author.

Ms. Soong, who was more than 80 years old, noted that many "people who had [the plastic speaker] installed complained that it breaks easily and the quality is not good because it is plastic." When asked what happens when a speaker breaks, Ms. Xing, in her mid-40s, complained, "There is no place to fix them and those who installed them do not fix them." In addition to a lack of services for maintaining a speaker, this move also shifted the responsibility of the cost onto households to individually sign up for a cable television connection. In Heyang, not everyone has a cable television connection, however, in part because of family economics and restrictions on the kinds of modifications that can be done on heritage homes (see Zhang, this Special Section). The current switchover to digital television is catalyzing this

reduction of wired radio infrastructure, for as Ms. Xing noted, "whoever comes to install . . . [a digital box] does not offer to set up a radio speaker."

The nationwide switchover to digital cable has also added a technological imperative to the organizational pressure for media centralization. Local cable authorities are finding the capital investment for this upgrade beyond their means, and so the state works to merge "bigger stations in the developed regions into broadcasting groups joined by cable network companies and radio stations in the same area" (Feng, Lau, Atkin, & Lin, 2009, p. 338). Despite these pressures for centralization, digitization is developing in the context of a largely "decentralized market structure" (Feng et al., 2009, p. 338) as many county-level stations have maintained their local programming, as exemplified by Jinyun County Television's 2010 switchover from analog (Ji et al., 2016).

Although local programming is not facing an existential threat from China's digital switchover, the result of the increased costs on media consumption is disconnecting poor peasants in Heyang from the remaining local (i.e., county and municipal) content. Participants noted whereas digital cable will cost them about 180 RMB a year, on top of the installation fee of 300 RMB, a satellite dish costs about 170 RMB and enables them to watch television for free. The result, according to Mr. Ming, a middle-aged peasant, is that "if you want local news you have to have digital cable, but this is too expensive." This has given rise to the economic strategy of choosing satellite television and surrendering a main source of access to local news.

Synthesizing the General Context and Particular Points of View

With improved access to home entertainment, we should see Heyang peasants becoming increasingly appeased with the developing conditions of their village (see Williams, 2003). This is not the case. In fact, some peasants yearn to again make use of available facilities for a village radio station. As mentioned, Heyang once had its own wired radio station, which today continues to serve as the sound room for the village theater. However, as the village became more saturated with other media, Heyang's village council declined to make use of it for village broadcasts.

In walking around and listening to the village, I found only three remaining outdoor speakers, and these were in the smaller natural village Yan Shan Xia, which has only recently become included in Heyang's administrative purview and has not experienced the same rapid development as Heyang proper (see Figures 2 and 3). The content of these broadcasts is provided by Jinyun County's radio station, which, as I heard over the speakers, largely rebroadcasts national and provincial programming, including *The Voice of Zhejiang*. These speakers are not loud, and I found I had to be within 15–20 m to hear the broadcasts.[3] In its current state, wired radio is no longer a common or a local communication platform.

The politics for restarting Heyang's village-level wired radio station are an ongoing issue in the village. Mr. Qiang, in his late 50s, claimed to "have been asking for [the village station to be reinstated]

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[3] On subsequent visit to Yan Sha Xia in 2017, I found that these speakers had been replaced as the result of a 2015 measure by Jinyun to update wired radio speakers.

for many years," and a senior in the village, Mr. Kun, noted, "We ask for speakers every year." These demands articulate the desire for a common source of local news to inform discursive politics. If there is no wired radio, the 60-year-old Mr. Gang, commented, "We will know nothing . . . [when] we have radio . . . we know something." Mr. Lin, a 50-year-old peasant, saw the value of wired radio for organizing peasants when "something . . . needs to be announced. Then people can know it right away."

Figure 2. A speaker at the front door of a home. Photo by author.

Figure 3. A speaker atop a light on a main road. Photo by author.

Others were less enthusiastic about wired radio, with 40-year-old Mr. Bai commenting, "It is better than not having it." Ms. Ting, a 60-year-old resident, said that local wired radio would not "help improve the relationship" between peasants and the government. In her 50s, Ms. Shu agreed: "If we listen we can only accept it; if we don't accept it . . . [nothing] will change. It's passive . . . it's . . . one-way communication." Mr. Qiang put the matter most succinctly: "Listening to the radio won't help. It would be better to have regular meetings." This message was repeated in another interview with Mr. Luo, a leader affiliated with Jinyun County, who argued that although village managers and regular residents might live together, the residents do not know what the managers are doing. He claims that the problem with the relationship is not a matter of technology, but of social organization, and emphasized the mass line importance of holding regular meetings.

In the calls for a return of in-person oral communication, we see the relevance of Innis's (1995b) argument that an oral tradition serves as a basis for "directing and enforcing the cooperation of individuals in the interest of the community, [and] maintaining group life" (p. 400). The "plea for time," to quote the title of one of Innis's articles, being made in Heyang is to be included in the formation and implementation of village policies.

Innis's focus on the vernacular as a means to consider feelings and maintain the interests of a community sheds light on the oral mechanisms behind Mao's discussion of the mass line as a means to understand the local conditions of the people to agitate and excite them into action (see Blecher, 1983). The vernacular, as I explain later, is at the core of Mao's articulation of the mass line, emphasizing the need to be close to the peasants and to rely on their efforts. As Dreher (2010) and Fricker (2003) point out, the issue is not simply engagement, but to let marginalized knowledge systems become part of the structure of a conversation—to listen to people on their terms. Premising technology in development can lead to neglect of such concerns. This is made evident in the contrast between the views of one village leader and peasant participants in regards to mobile phones.

Mr. Xia, a member of the village management committee, argued that access to technology is not a problem in Heyang. He noted that the Internet and mobile phones have replaced radio as a means for the government to inform residents. When I raised this point with peasants, many argued that mobile phones, and their attendant applications, are unable to serve their needs for a common communication platform. A whole focus group shook their heads and explained how groups, such as the elderly, are left out, unable to catch up with the new literacy demands, and do not want to use the multiple other applications included in a smart phone (see Oreglia, 2013, for similar findings). In the most actively reported usage, peasants said they repost stories they find on the Internet application Wechat. Mr. Quan, in his 60s, however, voiced the opinion that those who use smart phones are already oriented to thinking outside the village and have little attention for local affairs. This orientation away from the local is part of the ramifications Innis (1995a, 1995b, 2007) warns of as a destabilizing factor for societies rigidly reliant on space-biased technologies. The problem, as noted, is not the technological forms, but the social exploitation of their ability to assert authority over a vast distance without counterbalance from social institutions to localize the media.

Communicating to Agitate

Although Chinese leaders have rearticulated the mass line during China's postreform digital revolution, they have less than authentically adhered to the method constructed by Mao. Under Mao, the mass line represented a holistic conception of what should inform the CPC's direction, how the party should interpret feedback, and how to implement decisions. The standard formulation of the revolutionary mass line is quoted from Mao's 1943 direction for the Central Committee of the CPC:

> All correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses." This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. (Mao, 1965c, p. 118)

There has been debate over if and how the mass line had been carried out in China under Mao. Revolutionary Deng Tuo critiqued that the mass line was not adhered to during the Great Leap Forward (Cheek, 1997). Likewise, Hammond (1978) provides context for Smythe's (1981) and Zhao's (1998) concerns about the undemocratic nature of the policy, arguing that its procedural vagueness enabled it to be used however the CPC saw fit. Dittmer (1973) offers a more specific critique claiming that the mass line was used to focus public attention after inner-party rectification programs. These contrast with other accounts such as Meisner (1978), who found that the policy enabled negotiable flexibility based on local conditions for implementing top-down directives.

After Deng Xiaoping took power, the mass line was deemphasized because of its association with the failures of the Cultural Revolution (Perry, 2001). Despite this, in 1989, China's Premier Zhao Ziyang reignited the general feedback system of the mass line in the form of public opinion supervision (Thornton, 2011). This update to the mass line replaced the feedback structures from regular meetings with the people and engagement in their everyday labor with opinion surveys and other quantifiable responses (Thornton, 2011).

More recently, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping completed a two-year campaign, spearheaded by his 2013 New Eight-Point Guideline on Official Conduct to revitalize the mass line in the CPC's work. Inspired by the same concerns that were articulated in Heyang of a social distance between ordinary people and the government, Xi's policy is meant to enable access and bring the government and people close (Yi, 2014). However, whereas Xi's mass line emphasizes party interaction with the public on the basis of identifying specific failings in individual leader's work practices, Heyang residents want to be informed of local government initiatives and to be involved in decision making regarding the local implementation of these initiatives. These complaints demonstrate how Xi's mass line is a limited version of Mao's revolutionary inclusion of the masses into the overall direction of the CPC. Agitation, motivating people to take political action, is a crucial aspect of this difference. Xi's policy aims to pacify the masses by smoothing out the appearance of distance between citizens and "decadent" party leaders, whereas Mao

focused on awaking class-for-itself awareness to educate the party on how to further realize the revolution (Mao, 1961b, 1977b).

To be sure, government and party leaders are not wholly disconnected from Heyang peasants. Many live in Heyang themselves, and I happened to witness a county official visit the village to discuss concerns about the ongoing construction involved in burying Heyang's telephone wires. A large group gathered around the official who described the basic motivations for the project. Upset with the interference it caused in their lives, and concerned about the ecological effect and soundness of the architecture (Chen, this Special Section), those gathered were largely unsatisfied by the interaction and many of them continued the discussion long after the official left. Mr. Wei, an elderly party representative, talked with some of the last of the frustrated men in an effort to smooth emotions. Efforts to practice the mass line by going down and being close with peasants, as in the actions of these two officials, demonstrate that some fundamentals of the Maoist-era mass line remain, but they lack the "educating the educator" mentality articulated in Mao's mass line. In this manner, in-person oral communication needs to be emphasized with the politics of listening, which is reflected in the two-way transformative experience of Mao's mass line leadership. As things stand now, peasants are no longer a source sought for direction in policies that are increasingly informed by national interests in global institutions (O'Brien & Li, 1999).

Agitating to Communicate

When describing the differences in their relationship with the government since reform, nearly every participant provided the same answer: *yuan* (distant). The peasants defined this distance in terms of their ability to participate in the general affairs of the village. Mr. Gang claimed that there is distance "because [we] don't know the government's policies." Mr. Kun expanded on this notion saying, "The top-down relationship is not connected. At the bottom we don't know what the leaders want. . . . When we have some suggestion or opinion, there is no way to tell them." Mr. Kuo, in his mid-50s, noted, "Before, when the people got together, the government appreciated our opinions, but right now the government just acts on its own." Mr. Luo, the official from Jinyun, repeated this theme by asserting that without regular mass meetings most peasants do not know what the county and other authorities' policies are. This general state of affairs challenges Mao's emphasis on relying on the people, and, in conjunction with the changes in mass media, seems to be ripped verbatim from his critique of leaders who do not follow the mass line by "not let[ting] other people know what is to be done or how to do it" (Mao, 1961b, p. 242).

The peasants remember the Maoist era with slightly rose-colored glasses, as positive aspects were emphasized over negative experiences. They depicted it as a time of regular meetings to discuss national policies in concert with local initiatives. These meetings would be arranged at multiple levels including the work team, the whole village, and among the party and village representatives. Mr. Quan explained that there had been a progressive decline in the frequency of meetings: "Before we would have meetings once a month, now we don't. You can go a whole year and not have a meeting." When asked whether life was not better without so many meetings, I was told by Ms. Hong, "We . . . like to have meetings." Such meetings are seen as a primary way to be informed and to participate in local affairs. From Mr. Kuo's point of view, "Right now there are only meetings when something happens, not as a means to exchange opinions . . . [and] just communicate." As described by Mr. Kang, who was just shy of

his 70th birthday, "When we had meetings . . . everyone would go to the hall and they would tell you all the things that were happening in the village. Now just a few people get to make decisions." Mr. Ming added, "Whatever the people say is not useful because we do not have power. . . . We have no voice, no right to say anything." This again contrasts with Mao's instruction that "at all meetings, all participants should be encouraged to voice their opinions as fully as possible" (Mao, 1965b, p. 109).

The point that just a few people get to make decisions, however, is probably as true today as it was before. It is just that the experience of the decision-making process has shifted from regular meetings on how to implement decisions to the peasants being predominately left out of the process. Mao was never ambiguous on the point that mass line politics was a means to propagate the party's line among the population. Feedback was not intended to be rejection or dissent, but a means of informing the party about the condition of the people to further inner-party considerations (Mao, 1961a, 2004). This is the authoritarianism widely identified in the mass line and further complicated by Hammond's (1978) argument that procedural vagueness enabled top-down manipulation. It is here that Innis's (1962) arguments for oral culture are most at conflict with the mass line, resembling his arguments against the Catholic Church and its attempts to monopolize knowledge with reference to a central source of authority.

Interview participants, however, were not focused on disagreeing with the national government and its policy directions, but were concerned how policies are implemented. This is, in part, because they identify with the socialist intention of such policies and actively refer to such ideals in their political struggles at the local level (Zhao, 2007). Mr. Luo repeated the idea that most village residents agree with national policies. He added that regular meetings not only inform village residents of national, provincial, and local policies but also create the conditions where local leaders must respect the policies.

The growing social distance between leaders and peasants is not just in terms of political institutions, but in symbolic terms of "quality" and trust depicting the testimonial injustice they experience. This was summed up by Mr. Lao, who was over 80 years old, with the claim that "leaders are from the masses, but once elevated . . . they don't return to us." Articulating the lack of value that some peasants feel their voices have, Mr. Qiang stated, "Party members are not better than the average people. Their quality [*suzhi*] is not any better." This distancing was described in terms of trust by a peasant in his late 50s, Mr. Yu: "If you trust me, then I will tell you the things I am thinking, but if you do not trust me, there is no use for me to speak." Documenting this social distance between leaders and the people, Mr. Kun concluded, "The mass line . . . is good, but the leaders are separated from the people now and bureaucracy is a problem. It is not fair, it is not public, and it is not just." Their solution? Mr. Ru, in his 30s, claimed, "It's about changing attitudes," seeing the issue in terms of how the village council engages its residents.

The peasants' descriptions of the problems they have with the change in local politics, and their historically informed conceptions of what a good relationship should consist of, are largely consistent with Mao's (1977a) articulation of the mass line, particularly in the case of leaders being closely connected to peasants; in motivating, or agitating, peasants to participate in local politics (Mao, 1965a, 1965b, 1990, 1994); and the trust that must be invested in peasants to make these efforts matter (Mao, 1965b; also see Lin, 2014). Here, then, is the manner in which the orality of the mass line meets with the politics of

listening and testimonial injustice. Those who have historically been the lowest in society are to have their subjectivity listened to and be included in the local activities of national initiatives. As Wei Bu argues (as quoted in Oreglia et al., 2015), it is often impossible to understand what is being said by peasants without spending time in the countryside and sharing in rural experiences. It is this in-person oral quality of the mass line that is being jumped over in China's digital leap forward.

Mao (1965b) emphasized the role of the mass line to make leaders responsible for their work performance and as a means for the people to supervise party leadership; under Xi Jinping, this is only one aspect of the revolutionary mass line leadership. As for the issue of agitation, the people today are largely only motivated through appeals to profit (Dutton, 2000) or to produce consumer demand (Zhao, 1998) rather than the political concern of enacting class struggle. The means by which the mass line is being carried out during China's digital leap forward is deeply depoliticized.

Conclusion

The participants of this research do not identify themselves as victims of, or resistant to, an expanding global village. Rather, they display a lasting value for vernacular politics as they increasingly gain access to cutting-edge commodities for communication. Heeding the social justice concerns involved in listening, this article follows the agency voiced in memories of past communication forms and imaginations of ideal state–society relations. This process contextualizes the peasants' efforts to turn their frustrations with the social changes that have accompanied technological changes into demands for wired radio and regular village meetings. The conditions of this political communication indicate that the behavior of the CPC is agitating them, but their political demands to be informed are not the result of current mass line communication. In the technological closeness of the global village, China's peasants are agitated by social distance to political processes.

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