

Research as Communicative Praxis: Crossing the Urban–Rural Divide in Understanding Hong Kong’s Occupy Central Movement

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Nothing appears far removed from each other between the 2014 Occupy Central Movement in Hong Kong as a global city and the concerns and aspirations of the residents of Heyang, an ancient village in the hinterland of Zhejiang province, China. However, through a journey of research as communicative praxis that starts with an analysis of the framing of the Occupy Central Movement by China’s *People’s Daily* and ends with my active engagement with residents in Heyang, both in terms of their understanding of the Movement and their own local situations, this study arrived at moments of unexpected empathy. When lived experiences of the economically alienated were connected, rural citizens in Mainland China could relate their own ongoing struggles with that of protesters at the Occupy Central Movement in profound ways translocally, despite the chasms between the urban and the rural, the global city and the rural hinterland in today’s China.

Keywords: Occupy Central Movement, communication, praxis, urban–rural divide, lived experiences

Hong Kong used to be a small fishing village off the coast of southern China. It was the uneven encounter between Western imperialism and China’s ancient agrarian civilization over the period of more than a century that led to its transformation into a thriving global city. In 1997, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China under the “one country, two systems” arrangement as a result of the diplomatic negotiations between the British and the Chinese governments. Since then, advocacy for the accelerated democratization of Hong Kong’s political system has become a permanent thorn on the part of China’s Central Government.

By fall 2014, the public opinion of Hong Kong had been divided on the electoral reform of the upcoming election for the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. While some supported the Central Government’s

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proposal for having candidates running for chief executive to be selected by a nominating committee, some believed that this condition would deviate from what they perceived as genuine universal suffrage. Those who were opposed to the Central Government's proposal felt that this selection process would imply screening out candidates whose ideological views do not align with the party line of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Hence, their counterproposal was to have the screening process lifted and replaced by civic nomination so that a wider political spectrum of candidates could run for the chief executive position. The counterproposal of the opposition was not taken into consideration as the Central Government confirmed and announced the need for a selection process in late August 2014. This led to the commencement of acts of civil disobedience, also known as the Occupy Central Movement, or the Umbrella Movement, a month later, and it lasted for 79 days.

Existing scholarship on contentious politics in Hong Kong tends to focus on the implications of social movements for Hong Kong itself, at most expanded to relationships between the people in Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government, and the Central Government (Kuah-Pearce & Guiheux, 2009; Ma, 2015). This study, however, takes on Francis Lee's (2015) reminder of not overemphasizing the uniqueness of the Occupy Central Movement, but treating it as a case of social protests worldwide in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis—after all, even the official name of the Occupy Central Movement was inspired by the Occupy Wall Street protests. Instead of analyzing the Movement with other social protests happened around the globe, this article pursues a depth approach by situating the protest in a socioeconomic contour of contemporary China. Furthermore, inspired by this special section's "Global to Village" framework, this article examines the official media framing of this protest in China's most urbanized and globalized Special Administrative Region vis-à-vis how rural residents in Heyang village, Zhejiang province in Southeastern part of China, understand this protest in the context of country's rapidly transforming and increasingly digitalized communication infrastructure. That is, rather than isolating the official media frames and the rural residents' perception of the Movement from each other, this study marries the two by grounding the media analysis of the urban event in a rural context with a few objectives in mind: to challenge the dominant form of urban-centric scholarship, expose its vulnerabilities, and shed light on meaningful exchanges between urban and rural citizens. In doing so, this article draws on the concept of engaged communication as theorized by Hannah Arendt (1958) to gain insights on how villagers in a rural area relate their struggles in everyday life with Hong Kong's metropolitan and highly globalized protesters—whom they have never met in real life—as fellow citizens and formulate their understanding of an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006).

Rather than reporting the results of any conventional media analysis and audience reception study, what I offer here is the pedagogy of a transnational researcher. As a student of Chinese communication from Hong Kong, as somebody who first participated in a protest in Hong Kong and then watched the movement unfolding in fall 2014 in Beijing, this article first outlines changes that have permitted negative or sensitive news to gradually enter the Chinese media landscape and sketches the official framing of the Occupy Central Movement by the *People's Daily*, China's most authoritative official media outlet. Then, as a participant of this special section's Global to Village research team, I traveled to Heyang village in Zhejiang province as an activist researcher to ask rural residents in focus groups about their media usages, their news sources, and, more importantly to this study, their understanding of Hong Kong in general and their views of the Occupy Central Movement. In the process of engaging with the

villagers, I shared with them my own identity as a politically engaged citizen from Hong Kong and encouraged the villagers to talk about theirs. We discussed our lived experiences of economic and social development under local governments and the state, how we understood Hong Kong's relationship with the rest of China, and how we each related our struggles with those presented in Hong Kong. Through the acts of interacting with these villagers, we engaged in issues surrounding national affairs and political citizenship. The result is a transformative and even unexpected form of citizenship education that made me feel calling them "villagers" obsolete.

The very act of engaging with citizens from a rural area through words and deeds on political citizenship was in and of itself a profound form of knowledge production. This exercise allows me to create knowledge about how rural citizens relate their lived experiences of socioeconomic and political struggles with those of the highly urbanized and "special" Chinese citizens from Hong Kong as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006). In the rest of this article, I summarize the findings of my news analysis, and then, drawing on Hannah Arendt's (1958) theory of action, I frame my own positionality as a communicator in the village and report the results of my discussions with the villagers. Against and along with the official media framing of the Occupy Central Movement, my experience led me to conclude that the imagination for transclass and translocal connectivities and solidarities across the urban-rural, metropolitan-hinterland chasms within a Chinese nation is possible through acts of dialogic communication.

Changing Patterns of News Coverage About Protests in the Chinese Media

Similar to other social domain, the space for reporting social protests in the Chinese media has always been shaped, negotiated, and challenged by various social forces. With the exception of the weeks preceding the June 4 crackdown in the 1989 democracy movement, when China's top leadership and China's media elites were deeply divided, China's media have largely managed to keep social protests off the public view (Steinhardt, 2015). The silence may suggest the low occurrence of social movements; however, many studies report otherwise (X. Chen, 2012; C. K. Lee, 2007; O'Brien & Li, 2006; O'Brien & Stern, 2008). The number of social protests has increased annually since 1989 and, in particular, with the acceleration of the economic reforms in the post-1989 period, which, among other developments, has seen the privatization of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s and the displacements of villagers due to urbanization (Burns, 1999; C. K. Lee, 1998; Oi, 1999; Yan, 2011; Zhao, 2000, 2008).

The CCP's strategy of suppressing media reports of social movements, however, has been challenged by forces of marketization, the explosion of the Internet as a source of news, and the lessons learned from the negative consequences of trying to suppress news about the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (Steinhardt, 2015; Wang & Zhang, 2000). As the Internet became an important means of communication among the general public, and in the context of an asymmetrical information flow between Internet users and the government, the users often received information about a news event before the official news release (Wang & Zhang, 2000). Backlashes against the media's initial cover-up of the outbreak of SARS in 2003 provided further impetus for the leadership to rethink its tactics of approaching politically sensitive news (Wang & Zhang, 2000; Zhao, 2008).

Rather than simply suppressing news about social protests in an increasingly diverse and progressively decentralized media ecology and a crises-laden social landscape, the CCP has developed a range of mechanisms for covering negative news in general and social protests in particular. Specifically, the State Council Press Office, along with various levels of the CCP's propaganda departments, has established a regime of media management that quickly responds to the outbreak of negative issues and takes preemptive actions to shape public opinion (N. Chen, 2012; China Internet Network Information Center, 2004; Perry, 2007; Stockmann, 2013; "Tufa gonggong shijian yingji guanli tanxi" 2008). Characterized by being highly selective of what information to make available and how this information is pieced together, the CCP's new information management strategies have contributed to establish the Chinese media system as a primary definer of negative events and a conveyor of the party's line (Stockmann, 2013; Wu, 2010; Zhao, 1998, 2008). It is within this context that we will look at how official news frames work to discredit unlawful collective actions such as Hong Kong's Occupy Central Movement.

The Official Media Discourse on Hong Kong's Occupy Central Movement

As the CCP's official mouthpiece, the *People's Daily* is most likely to align its position with the median political preference of the party (Stockmann, 2013). Consequently, it serves as an ideal news outlet to get a sense of the official perspective. I collected all the news articles about the protest published since the proposed idea of occupying Central (Tai, 2013) until a month after the clearance of all occupied zone from the *People's Daily's* online database. I then subjected the entire collection, a total of 80 articles from January 16, 2013, to January 31, 2015, to frame analysis.

The origin of framing analysis in communication study is often attributed to the work of Erving Goffman (1974). His ethnographic research informed him to theorize frames as interpretative schemes that communicators use when making sense of their world. In this analysis, the communicators are the journalists who wrote the articles for the *People's Daily*. Through their interpretation, journalists allow readers to locate, perceive, and identify issues of concern. Similarly, according to Gamson and Modigliani (1987), a news frame is an organizing principle for making sense of an event and suggesting what is at stake. It defines "what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Entman further delineates a news frame as containing one or more of the following elements. It typically defines the problems of a controversial issue, identifies causes of the issue, offers moral evaluation, and provides treatment to the controversy described (Entman, 1993, 2003). A frame may not contain all four elements. For instance, while some frames may contain the definition of the problems and moral evaluations, some put a stronger emphasis on the causes.

Looking specifically at these four aspects, my analysis finds three recurring frames in the *People's Daily's* coverage of the Occupy Central Movement. I call the first one the legality frame. Articles that fall into this frame stress the illegality of the protest. It defines the Movement as being disrespectful of laws, be it criminal or civil, and undermining rule of law. These articles point out that protesters should instead express their opinion through authorized and lawful avenues. They also suggest that the police would enforce laws and potentially arrest the protesters as treatments. Other features of this frame include the moral evaluation that this Movement should be opposed, as well as the treatment to clear the protesters.

The second frame is the ordinary people frame. Articles of this frame are concerned with the interest and the daily life of the general public in Hong Kong. They describe that the problems caused by blockades, such as traffic jams and school suspension, negatively affected the livelihoods of ordinary people. As such, these articles characterize the Movement as undermining the public interest and thus should be opposed. The solution offered by this frame is similar to that of the legality frame. It says that the Movement should recede or the law enforcement officials would handle the case under the proper legal procedure to restore social order. The frame's take on causes and moral evaluation is least noticeable.

The third frame puts a lot of emphasis on causes. The Movement is portrayed as an attempt to violate the Basic Law, to pressure the CCP to reverse its decision, to undermine the state's sovereignty, to disobey the Chinese National People's Congress Standing Committee's decision on democratization and ultimately to violate the principle of "one country, two systems." The evaluation says that Hong Kong should follow the constitution for democratization. With the emphasis on following the lead of the constitution, I term this frame the constitutional authority frame. The frame also perceives the Movement as being hijacked by a minority population, especially by students and youngsters who did not understand or had not experienced imperial aggression. It defines the problems as undermining the rule of law and democratic values and causing economic repercussions and disturbance to social and political stability.

Informed by Todd Gitlin's (1980) work to further appreciate the efficacy of these frames in the context of China's highly contested social terrain and not take the media texts at their face value, it is important to situate them in a broader socioeconomic context (Entman, 1991; Nisbet, 2010; Reese, 2001, 2010; Van Gorp, 2010). The legality frame suggests that unlawful protests should be discredited and condemned. By emphasizing the Movement's illegal nature, the newspaper not only shows the slim possibility of its victory but also underscores the tremendous cost of overcoming the obstacles. Given the high rate of occurrence of protests in other parts of China, the need to discredit unlawful collective actions is timely. Showing disapproval to disruptive actions halts the spread of such actions and the potentiality of any concerted actions across the country. Any recognition of protests in the national media may instigate local grievances across geographical borders, posing danger to the party's rule (Ortmann, 2015).

Although the newspaper suppresses dissident voices to prevent any outbreak of protests translocally, it maintains a delicate balance by acting as representatives of everyday people through the ordinary people frame. This frame appeals to the inconvenience faced by the general public and their opposition to the Movement. By highlighting how the Movement hurts the businesses and livelihoods of the working people, the discourse guides the public to be opposed to the Movement and to support the authorities' action to deal with the protesters through legal procedures. Setting aside the plight of the protesters, this frame positions the CCP as representing the interest of ordinary citizens and rallying their oppositional sentiment against the protesters (F. Chen, 2008).

Finally, the constitutional authority frame, with its emphasis that democratization can only be realized by following constitutional laws, demands protesters and the rest of the citizens to obey the law unequivocally. The appeal to the constitution, as well as the notion of rule of law, is articulated in ways to undermine the legitimacy of civil disobedience (Erni, 2015; F. Lee, 2015). This appeal is aligned with the recent national agenda to promote rule of law (*yifa zhiguo*) under Xi Jinping's leadership (Yuen, 2015).

Leveraging constitutional authority is also a response to the causes identified in this frame. This frame depicts protesters' attempt to challenge the Basic Law, to threaten the Central Government to reverse its decisions, and ultimately to direct their challenge to the political system to the Central Government, unlike many small-scaled disruptive actions that merely make demands on the local governments (Cai, 2008). Because of the protesters' demand on the central state, the news discourse sends a clear message about the impossibility of challenging the regime's legitimacy and other national decisions on political and economic developments. Leveraging the name of justice, this frame serves to exercise control over protests that do not align with the party line.

To summarize, as the *People's Daily* frames the Movement as it unfolded in an increasingly crises-laden social landscape, it sends strong political messages to the entire nation. Altogether, the news frames take preemptive discursive measures against the spread of collective actions across localities, demonstrating the CCP's role in representing ordinary citizens and the masses, and strengthens its claim to constitutional authority in an attempt to suppress dissident voices.

Grounding the Official National Discourse in the Village

The intended role of the official media as a primary definer of national discourse is one thing; how the official frames are accepted, negotiated, or rejected on the ground, however, is quite another. The Global to Village project, which was designed to allow researchers like myself to move beyond our normal intellectual horizons to ground our otherwise global research in a Chinese village setting, provided me with a compelling opportunity to move beyond media analysis to find out how people on the ground understand Hong Kong in general and the Occupy Central Movement in particular. As mentioned in the introduction, rather than pursuing this part of the project as a conventional audience reception study, I positioned myself as an activist researcher engaging in communicative praxis. Before diving into the conversations with people in Heyang, it is important to first elaborate the theoretical standpoint of communicative praxis and its implications for the kind of communication scholarship I am practicing.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt's (1958) theory of action, I positioned myself as an engaged communication scholar in my interactions with the Heyang residents whom our project had collectively recruited to participate in focus group discussions (see Zhao; Qian, this Special Section). Traditionally, communication is seen as a means for conveying ideas and knowledge from one to another. However, this article would like to challenge this conventional notion of communication and liberates praxis from its subordination to the Aristotelian *theoria* in the theory/practice distinction (Ramsey & Miller, 2003). This study hopes to argue that the praxis of communicating with people itself can illuminate insights and understanding prior to any knowledge of those insights. The act of communication in and itself is knowledge generating. In other words, the communicative praxis is a value-added process to knowledge production.

Arendt theorizes that to act and speak is to engage the freedom to begin something new with the expectation that something unexpected might result. When a newcomer walks into a community, we might say, using Arendt's (1958) words, that he or she "possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (p. 9). In the context of situating myself in Heyang with the people there, I act

and communicate with them as a newcomer, beginning something unanticipated and generating insights that I myself did not have prior knowledge of.

The self that is involved in the act of communication is another important conception that needs to be elaborated by drawing on Arendt's scholarship. She maintains that the key elements of the self are shaped by action. In action and speech, the self inevitably reveals her or his identity in the process of disclosing oneself to others. In this sense, both I and my focus group participants in Heyang engaged in a process of acting together, which in turn exposed our identities and worldviews in spite of existing differences.

Arendt believes that through words and deeds people can affirm or reveal who they are as unique beings with distinctive qualities. In this manner, action is theorized as a process of revelation wherein the subject's existential being is revealed. But this does not mean the self is conceptualized as a finished product. Instead, she theorizes the formation of self as a process that results from our social and communal actions. It is these contexts where conversations and actions occur and are opened to an imaginary of natality. Within these situations, the self is constantly renewed, modified, and may even experience transcendence.

In relations with other in conversation with the self, Arendt roots her conception of self and other selves in notions of equality and plurality. She sees human beings in communication as equal beings. We are equal because we are all of the same species. This, according to Arendt, explains how and why human beings have the capacity to relate to each other. The notion of equality also serves as an important reminder for researchers, like myself, when interviewing research subjects because it elevates everyone to take part in conversations on an equal footing. Nobody's acts of communication are less than others. Without paying attention to the notion of equality in communicative praxis and the tendency of overemphasizing the researcher self, the researcher could run the risk of being unaware of the power dynamics with the research subjects and positioning him- or herself as being more important than others. And this is the foundation of why I felt calling the people I met in Heyang "villagers," which typically implies backwardness and isolation, obsolete.

The notion of plurality also invigorates the discussions about the communicative relationship in a more nuanced way. Arendt sees human beings of equal footing relating to each other in distinctive ways. While the self is shaped by social and communal context, the effects on each being may be vastly different. Instead of reaching a consensual self commonly shared by everyone in communication, we each may be transformed in new yet distinctive ways. Through words and deeds in engaging issues of interest and concern, our new and plural relationships of selves constitute to a network of connection that makes up the realm of human affairs; Arendt terms this network the "polis."

Based on this understanding of acts of communication and the relations within self and with other selves, I would argue that, as supported with insights generated during the focus group discussions, the ability to relate to other humans could be driven by biological, social, and economic needs and struggles. Simply justifying the ability to relate on the basis of being the same species, as Arendt puts it, seems inadequate.

Before I dive into the discussions about the discussion with the residents in Heyang, I will describe the context that possibly allows for them to resonate with the protesters of the Occupy Central Movement in Hong Kong. In fall 2014, around the time when the Occupy Central Movement emerged, Heyang was also in a turmoil. Triggered by forces of globalization, urbanization, and shifting economic responsibilities from the Central Government to local communities, Heyang village, like many other Chinese villages, has undergone a drastic process of economic transformation and cultural dislocation (Zhao; Qian; Zhang, this Special Section). As agricultural economy has been downplayed, other forms of economic development, such as the development of rural tourism, have been elevated to play a more significant role. However, although villagers in Heyang supported tourism development in the early 2000s, a whole range of factors had led them to question their initial enthusiasm. The economic returns received from tourist development were perceived as insignificant in respect to the sacrifices they have made. Many villagers believed that the governmental promise of revitalizing the village had been broken. Worse still, villagers felt that their channels of participating in the village's development process were limited (Hauck, this Special Section).

Tensions over local development with local officials were heightened. Backlashes against tourism development among villagers and confrontations against local leaders have reached an unprecedented level. Leveraging the temporal coincidence of the Hong Kong's protests and Heyang residents' own discontent, the remaining of my article reports how people in Heyang reflect their real-life struggles in relation to their Hong Kong counterparts across localities, and the resulting process of a mutual transformation between myself and my research subjects during our encounter.

Our collective focus group discussions had two parts. The main part involved 94 registered Heyang residents selected through a purposive sampling method (58 male participants and 36 female participants) by our project team. The supplementary special focus group involved more than a dozen local officials who were from Heyang, frequently returned to Heyang for family reasons, but were not long registered village residents. I started my conversation with the Heyang residents by asking them to reveal their sources and channels of obtaining news in general, their general impressions about Hong Kong and its relationship with the Central Government, and their own relations with the Heyang's administrative authorities. I started by probing them about what they had read, seen, or heard about the Occupy Central Movement, if anything, and then their opinions about the Movement. Then, instead of merely collecting their opinions and having them exposed their identities, I answered their queries about the reasons for the Movement by disclosing my identity to them.

Exposing my identity was an attempt to embark on something new and to generate unanticipated knowledge, stemmed from Arendt's theory of action. As I came clean about myself to the people in Heyang, I first explained why I am interested in the topic of discussions. First, growing up in Hong Kong and having experienced colonial rule and the handover, I have always been interested in contentious politics in Hong Kong. Second, having received education in Hong Kong, Vancouver, and Beijing, the approach I had undertaken to understand Hong Kong politics had long been confined to the realm of studying government and state policies. Furthermore, my understanding around contentious politics of Hong Kong had always been urban centric. Being part of the Global to Village project allowed me to bring this research topic to rural China to seek for new knowledge that I would not have known otherwise.

I then elaborated where my perception of the Hong Kong protesters was coming from. Witnessing my peers' overtime working schedule and the socioeconomic obstacles of establishing a family, I am sympathetic with the protesting youth's plight as part of the condition faced by many urban youths in the postglobal financial-crisis era. The lower middle class's hopes for upward mobility are deemed minimal. There seems to be a chasm between the Hong Kong dream and reality. As such, I see the protest as a form of resistance against uneven economic development. Economic incentives provided by the Central Government have proven to contribute to Hong Kong's economy from the perspective of macroeconomics and to some local economic elites for generating lucrative profits (Veg, 2015). However, the trickle-down promise of improving the livelihoods especially of the lower class has hardly been realized. Thus, economic plight has turned into political grievances. Many protesters believed that if the nomination process of the electoral system is civic based, they could vote for a candidate representative of the interest of the lower middle class as opposed to local economic elites, addressing issues of inequality and redistribution of wealth. A condensed version of my questions was asked of the county- or township-level officials who were from Heyang, but were no longer official Heyang residents.

Initial Discussion: Resonance With the Ordinary People Frame

The following two sections synthesize the findings from participants of the focus groups. Representative verbatims are included as well.

When asked about their media consumption habit, most of the villagers relied on news channels on television. Some participants also used Moments on WeChat to learn about news. This feature is comparable to news feed on Facebook or timeline on Twitter.

When asked if they read newspapers and specifically the *People's Daily*, almost no villagers reported that they read print media, not to mention the national and official newspaper. The most commonly mentioned reasons for not reading newspapers were their busy schedule as farmers. Yet many villagers reported that they used to have a habit of reading the *People's Daily*. They no longer did so because of its inaccessibility and the growing irrelevance to their everyday life. Some expressed that the newspaper's inaccessibility was an epitome of "village leaders harboring each other" (Mr. Zhu, age 62, July 5). They explained that although the current subscription fee was paid by the village, the newspapers were not made available to them because they were only sent to the home of the village party secretary. Some villagers felt that the *People's Daily* had been increasingly "detached from the people" (Mr. Zhu, age 42, July 6).

When asked about their impression of Hong Kong, many villagers believed that Hong Kong was a prosperous and economically vibrant city where people were wealthy. Despite the overwhelmingly positive impression about Hong Kong, a villager and some Heyang-grown officials felt that its economic status has been in decline as China grows stronger. Without any prompt, some villagers recalled the occurrence of a social unrest in late 2014 in Hong Kong. When probed regarding their perception of the city's relationship with the Central Government, many felt that the relationship "must be good" (Mr. Zhu, age 70, July 6) because of the perceived special treatment offered by the Central Government. Some were however skeptical of the ostensibly positive relationship depicted in the media.

Initial perceptions of Heyang residents about the Occupy Central Movement show a resonance with the ordinary people frame. About half of the participants had read, seen, or heard about the Movement. Of those who had knowledge about it, most of them learned about it on television—as explained above, the *People's Daily*, which I used as the standard bearer of the official discourse, was not available to the villagers. They perceived the event as affecting the traffic, livelihoods, and safety of ordinary people, security of the nation, and business of tourism. They believed the Movement was caused by people's dissatisfactions with the Hong Kong government and certain social policies. Some understood that the event was triggered by people's disappointment with the electoral system, their desire for autonomy, and foreign influences. Most of the villagers reported that they did not have a firm normative judgment because of their lack of knowledge. Despite that, they felt that the protesters' action should not be supported or encouraged for the negative effects on the rest of the society.

Consistent with the ordinary people frame, participants identify that the inconvenience caused by the traffic blockade affected the livelihoods of ordinary people. None of them have a strong and elaborate opinion on moral evaluation. However, there are differences between the perception of the participants and the ordinary people news frame. First, many participants were convinced that the cause was linked to protesters' dissatisfaction with the regional government and social policies, unlike the absence of the discussion on causes in the ordinary people news frame. Second, while the treatments are suggested in the news frame, such as addressing protesters through law and order and the necessity to recede, no participants had suggested any treatments alike. Among the three media frames, the ordinary people frame in the official discourse seems to resonate most with the residents in Heyang. However, as will be illustrated later, residents questioned the completeness of the ordinary people frame because the frame was not able to answer all of their queries.

The nonresident Heyang-grown participants who are local officials were rather affirmative of the negativity of the Movement. They believed that the protesters were no doubt unwise. All of them had heard about the Movement. The focus of the discussion rested primarily on moral evaluation and remedy. They strongly believed that the sit-in was inappropriate because going against the Central Government does no good to Hong Kong. They thought that protesters should support the Central Government's determination and effort in democratizing the electoral system within the constitutional framework. They also had an impression that the protesters only represented a minority who needed to be better cultivated and guided in interpreting and obeying the constitution.

Heyang-grown local officials made sense of the protest in a similar way as the constitutional authority frame. Both of them focus on the necessity to follow the constitution and the Central Government for democratization. They believed that the protesters were a minority who could not fully represent the vast majority. The irrationality of the sit-in was highlighted in both the frame and among the local officials. Although local officials were vocal about the need for civil cultivation, a similar remedy does not exist in the news frame.

As time permitted further discussions with participants at the focus groups with regular Heyang residents, many participants could not make sense of why the Movement emerged in the first place and what social conditions were present for the Movement to last. As I suggested earlier, they imagined Hong

Kong to be a prosperous and economically vibrant city where people were very well off. They also imagined that the city's relationship with the Central Government to be very good because of the perceived special treatments offered by the Central Government—that is, in the mind of regular Heyang residents, Hong Kong is a special returned child of mother China. Despite some skepticism toward the ostensibly positive relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China depicted in the media, many could not wrap their head around the emergence of the Movement and what they saw in the media. One participant put it, "There must be some problems, otherwise there won't be that many protesters" (Ms. Zhu, age 40, July 4). Another participant of the same group also said, "If the relationship is all good, there is no way people can be agitated" (Mr. Zhu, age 51, July 4). Another participant expressed, "It's hard to comprehend why it [the Occupy Central Movement] happened. I'm rather concerned with my own circumstances. If an "Occupy Central Movement" happens in Heyang, I will be able to understand why it happened" (Mr. Zhu, age 84, July 4).

Leveraging the temporal coincidence of the discontent in Heyang at that time and their concern with Heyang, the Heyang resident participants were invited to think if the two localities could be compared. Many thought that besides the temporal coincidence of the village's plight with Hong Kong's Movement the two localities could hardly be compared, especially on the basis of economic development. Instead, the participants talked largely about their own struggles and their relations with both the Heyang village council and the Jinyun County Heyang Ancient-Dwellings Protection and Development Management Committee, or the Management Committee (MC), a special county-level government administrative body that has overtaken the responsibility of Heyang's development.

Many participants were desperate to have their needs and sufferings that resulted from tourism development to be known to the authority. They were frustrated with the capability of the MC in managing Heyang. They felt that the funds allocated by the government of higher levels, usually referred to the Central Government, have not been spent to the benefit of the villagers. Many participants thought Heyang appeared to be a relatively developed village from an outsider's perspective, but they were deeply disappointed with the developmental promise made by the MC. They felt that the trickle-down benefits generated from tourism could never be realized, despite their sacrifices made for the revitalization. Hence, many described that the development of an "ancient living village" (*guminju*) had become a "suffered living village" (*kuminju*). This saying was very popular in part it describes the discrepancy between the developmental promise and their actual living conditions; in part the word for *ancient* and *suffered* in the first characters of the two phrases rhyme in local dialect spoken in Heyang and Mandarin Chinese (see also Qian; Zhang, this Special Section).

Furthermore, because the MC prohibited homeowners from remodeling certain houses for architectural conservation, many participants were anguished that they could hardly accommodate their growing household sizes. Anguish around poor living conditions has boiled over. They were concerned about fairness over past and current ways of allocating land plots for residential housing. In short, they questioned the MC's will to redistribute resources fairly.

Connecting Protests in a Global City With Rural Residents

Following up Heyang residents' questions on why the Occupy Central Movement emerged and the social conditions for it to last, I exposed my identity to explain how I viewed the Movement.

Some participants could not imagine the emergence of the Movement in absence of any economic plight. A male participant in his 50s said, in a July 7 session, "Unless there is a lack of clothes, food, places to live, and money, I don't see why they would create such a big deal." This led me to link the origins of the Occupy Central Movement with economic plight. When probed with this linkage, participants began to relate their socioeconomic situations with the protesters' demands. Some were able to puzzle out their initial contradictory impression of Hong Kong. A 63-year-old male participant said, in a July 4 session, "Hong Kong is like Heyang in a way that outsiders and visitors always thought we are living in heaven. But they can never feel our sufferings." They started to relate to the global city's protesters' frustration with the similar economic and political struggles faced by themselves.

The Heyang residents who relate themselves with Hong Kong protesters may have a connection to the basis of being the same species, as Arendt puts it. But their indignation against injustice and unfairness, be it material or political, caused by frustrations with not only the benefits of development and lack of participation in a local structural condition suggests that they were able to associate the vulnerabilities of protesters in Hong Kong across regions (Hurst, 2008). The socioeconomic contexts and struggles in the village provided them the tools to relate to Hong Kong protesters across their many divides with these remote urban protesters.

These participants then saw the protesters as an economically alienated group by resonating their lived experiences, or "biographies," in Jasper's (2008) terminology with the urban protesters'. According to Jasper, these experiences are idiosyncratic and unique to one who has lived through them. They are entrenched within a socioeconomic context in which one situates. They are more than merely an aggregation of personal experiences but also take into account the interplay of forces in a structural environment. Their lived experiences provide the heuristics to make sense not only of their immediate surroundings but also of others within comparable structural institutions. By extrapolating their economic frustration and political grievances, people of shared lived experiences could relate with each other even across localities segregated by an urban-rural divide. When lived experiences are connected, and when real-life struggles are touched on, even across localities delineated by the urban-rural divide, the depth of resonance can be transformational (Modebadze, 2010).

The power of communicative praxis lies in its ability to reveal or even produce knowledge that is not known to the communicator, be it myself or the participants of the focus groups. But through the acts of communication and disclosing our struggles, identities, and worldviews, the imagination for transclass and translocal connectivities and solidarities across the urban-rural chasm is possible.

Another powerful component in communicative praxis is the creation of a transcendent self. I may not be able to speak for other participants, but my "self" has certainly been transformed as a result of this intellectual journey. If the participants' worldviews have also been transformed through this

communicative praxis, it does not mean we have settled on a consensual self that we all share. Instead, each of us may be transformed in unique and plural ways.

For myself, this communicative process has largely transformed my perception about rural residents. Before this study, I thought bringing a research topic related to contentious politics to Heyang would be of absolute irrelevance. I had not imagined people in the village could offer me any insights into analyzing the Occupy Central Movement. No doubt, I was wrong. There are people in the rural area who engage in political and citizenship issues. Who am I to judge whether they care or have the capacity to have an opinion on it? My view toward village residents was clearly urban centric. I am indebted to these participants for having these stimulating conversations with me. They have transformed me in ways that even I had not anticipated. This communicative process has not only transformed my view toward this urban–rural divide but also has challenged me to treat the participants as equals to discuss political and citizenship issues. This network of words and deeds constituted by our freedom to be vulnerable as communicators has knitted a web of polis discussing public affairs.

Heyang residents' real-life struggles also offered them resources to work out their contradictions about Hong Kong that was not available in official media discourse. Participants critically reflected that the apparently developed image of Hong Kong may not be unilaterally experienced across individuals of unequal socioeconomic status as in Heyang. The economic transition may bring benefits to the village from an outsider's perspective. However, this supposedly positive story may not have dissected the complexity of the economic transitions and the underlying divide within a village. This finding complicates the notion of China as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006) and the role of media in it. In this case, not only print media but also other forms of media have not proven to be effective connectors between citizens who have not met in real life because the content of the news narrative has left the Heyang residents' questions unanswered; but the communicative praxis at my disposal has proven to be a useful tool for enabling some fellow-feeling discussion surrounding issues of economic justice and political participation.

Although some Heyang residents were reflexive of the economic struggles presented across localities, those who had not expressed grievances toward the village council—that is, township- and county-level officials from Heyang—remained anchored in their belief that the wrongdoing of the protesters should not be forgiven. It is worth noting that views within the village are diverse. This again speaks to Arendt's notion of plurality in the theory of action. The transcendental self through acts of communication do not mean a consensual or same self shared by communicators in the action. It is the plurality and the diversity that constitute the significance of communicative praxis itself and the polis.

A relational view with the protesters in Hong Kong was observed among those who had previous conflictual experiences with the local government, whereas those who hold bureaucratic jobs in local government offices were more likely to anchor in their oppositional views against the protest, even after being prompted with the potential comparability of the two regions. Even within the village, a divide between elitist perceptions and lower class thoughts was observed. This not only sheds light to the central–local divide in interpreting contentious politics but also reinforces the theory that seeing "villages as bounded and coherent social wholes" (Sorge & Padwe, 2015, p. 235) would mask the power dynamics at play. These findings reaffirm the notion of plurality from a theoretical standpoint that the effects to

which each individual experiences the meanings constituted in the acts of communication may be starkly opposite.

Conclusions

By challenging the narrowness of studying media and politics with an unreflective urban bias and by taking an activist approach to research as a communicative praxis, this study gives nuances to the ways in which rural residents imagine their urban counterparts. Although rural residents initially resonated with the “ordinary people” official news frame, the frame is not sufficient to explain their paradoxical understanding of the protesters in Hong Kong. When recontextualized the plight of the urban protesters for Heyang residents, some were able to critically link their own lived experiences with those of the urban protesters with compassion across urban and rural localities.

Inspired by Arendt’s idea around natality of generating unexpectedly new knowledge through words and deeds, the communicative effort has empowered this study to produce knowledge regarding how the study of urban politics can be broadened to the rural areas, and specifically, how rural villagers could meet urban protesters through shared lived experiences translocally, even though they are demarcated by the urban–rural divide. Stemming from Arendt’s notion of equality and plurality, the acts of communication has enabled this study to acknowledge the equality between researcher and research subjects as well as rural residents’ potentialities of engaging in public affairs and constructing their imagined communities with urban residents.

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