Implied truth, complementary media practices, and successful atomized activism in China

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Abstract
While much research stereotypes mass media in authoritarian contexts as mouthpieces of the ruling party, we argue that successful social media–driven activism also requires the support of mass media, even in authoritarian contexts. To investigate the roles of social media and mass media on collective mobilization, we analyzed a case in Guangzhou, China, and conducted in-depth interviews to conceptualize the interconnected relationship between social media and mass media from the perspective of resource mobilization. Findings reveal that social media facilitated the mobilization of participants by providing less fungible and timely resources at the initial stages of collective action. However, it is the more fungible and enduring resources provided by the mass media that sustain the intensity of external pressures to the government. The complementarity between social and mass media in atomized collective action in China is in essence the configuration between exclusive and monopolized resources mediated by a middle-ground discursive mode—“implied truth.”

Keywords
Atomized activism, China, implied truth, individual, mass media, resource mobilization, social media

Introduction
In recent years, collective action has shifted from movement organizations with hierarchical structures, intermediary roles, and clichéd visions to that which encourages greater individual agency and distributed action (Benkler et al., 2015; Farrell, 2012; Lee, 2015). Similarly, in the Chinese...
context, with the prevalence of social media use around 2010, when Renren and Weibo gained prominence, the communication resources, capacity, and needs of individuals changed dramatically, resulting in the increased salience of independent, critical voices of grassroots groups that rival grand narratives from government-backed mass media.

Given the lack of an organizational base and official recognition, individual-initiated mobilization in China not only manifests its emerging salience in the form of fancy performances, repertoire, and rhetoric, but also in various attempts and endeavors to obtain resources to reverse the governance logic that neglects personal things (Liu, 2017; Sheng, 2017). Building upon the insights of Fu (2017) and Liu (2017), we conceptualize the individualized turn in collective action in China as “atomized activism” where individuals who are unaffiliated with existing organizations and groups initiate collective action through their own social networks. Social media has made atomized activism possible in China because it provides new avenues and useful tools for activists to obtain available resources and set their own agenda with less pre-emptive intervention from authorities, thus bypassing traditional mass media gatekeepers.

Compared to the activities of prominent social groups that are affiliated to authority, most instances of atomized activism are not targets of traditional news coverage. Unless activists successfully create an event so newsworthy that it is impossible to ignore, their voices are mostly neglected by the mass media (Barker, 2008), and the circumstances in authoritarian contexts such as China are even worse. In the Chinese media ecosystem, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) either owns or controls all mass media. They are obliged to represent CCP’s positions, to protect its authority, legitimacy, and the unity of the party (Y. Zhao, 2000, 2008). Business considerations of Chinese mass media are always subordinate to their political obligations. The desires for and imaginations of autonomy, freedom of speech, and democracy are mainly reflected in social media. Therefore, social media could be a more reliable ally than the mass media for activists to engage successfully in atomized activism (Farquhar, 2015).

Although mass media in authoritarian contexts is naturally associated with censorship or propaganda, we argue that mass media can still facilitate non-government sanctioned atomized activism under certain circumstances. Instead of an oppositional framework pitting the effectiveness of social media against mass media in collective mobilization, we propose an alternative framework by considering the following: (1) Does mass media mitigate limitations of social media in atomized activism in China and why? (2) How do mass media and social media interact with each other to drive the successful implementation of atomized actions?

In this study, we focus on a typical atomized activism case, the “Ice Bucket Challenge” (IBC), in Guangzhou, China, using the resource mobilization theory (RMT). We analyzed the case using in-depth interviews and content analysis of media reports and by summarizing the media-use strategies of individual activists and the roles of social media and mass media in the successful implementation of this atomized action. In the following sections, we first discuss the theoretical foundations of the study to conceptualize the interplay between social and mass media. We then present the findings of the representative case study.

**Literature review**

**Mass media and collective action in China**

In authoritarian contexts, mass media organizations are often regarded as allies of authority (Clark, 2012; Tufecki & Wilson, 2012). Mass media may either cease to offer coverage or cover collective action involving a protest paradigm, portraying such action as out-on-a-limb and unreasonable
manifestations of self-interest with ulterior motives at the expense of, or without concern for the collective interest (Barker, 2008; Sheng, 2017). However, in China, contrary to popular narratives, media organizations do not always invoke such a paradigm when covering collective action.

The media system in China is not monolithic. Consistent with the idea of “fragmented authoritarianism” (Lieberthal, 2004), the current Chinese media system has spaces for bargaining, autonomy, and the pursuit of news professionalism. The Chinese media system is characterized by the combination of Tiao and Kuai (Xia & Yuan, 2014). Tiao is the control exerted by centralized executive levels of media organizations and their affiliated central party committees and government, while Kuai, or territorial management (shudi guanli), refers to localized media organizations and their affiliated local party committees and governments at in their respective regions. The spaces for mass media to exercise some form of autonomy and news professionalism lie in the interest conflicts between the central and local governments and the cross-region coverage of media organizations (Xia & Yuan, 2014).

The media is an important tool to preserve the authority and legitimacy of the central government and supervise local governments (Y. Zhao, 2008). For instance, the support of central government media for the anti-eviction movement in some county-level cities and its in-depth reports on corruption involving citizen–government conflicts reflects the supervision of the central government (Brady, 2008). The power of the media depends on its level; it can supervise and criticize lower level party and government institutions and personnel (Y. Wang, 2012). To some extent, low-level government bodies and personnel who lack administrative and bargaining power become scapegoats so that the central government maintains social stability and enjoys a positive impression among the public (Xia & Yuan, 2014).

Moreover, according to the principles of territorial management, media organizations are tagged to government bodies in specific regions and thus cannot criticize government institutions operating at in a similar area. However, the system does not restrict the media in carrying out supervision in other areas, that is, crossing their own administrative regions to report on governance and social problems in other regions (Y. Wang, 2012; Xia & Yuan, 2014). This practice of being a watchdog for others’ houses (Yidi Jiandu) has been practiced in the media coverage of several social movements, such as the anti-nuclear movement in Jiang Men in 2013 (Zeng et al., 2014). While the local media in Jiang Men portrayed the construction of nuclear plants as harmless, environmentally friendly, and profitable, the local media in Guangzhou supported the movement, questioning the declaration procedures for nuclear projects and lack of communication between the government and the public.

Other than structure, positive media coverage of social movements is also affected by the specific nature of the issue and framing practices (Brady, 2008; Xia & Yuan, 2014). Although some issues are sensitive, they do not infringe any “bottom line,” especially when these issues do not affect the reputation of the local government. For example, while anti-PX movements in Xiamen and Maoming can receive supportive reports because the PX issue provokes heated debate among the public, criticism is directed at enterprises rather than the government (Zhou & Yang, 2018). Rauchfleisch and Schäfer (2015) named these relatively liberal and autonomous spaces initiated by specific issues as “thematic public sphere,” implying that media coverage on apolitical and less contentious issues is much more open and less regulated. Positive reporting of social movements can be tolerated if the media can provide solutions or frame a good image of the government (Brady, 2008). For instance, when the Focus Report (Jiaodian Fangtan), a critical news program on China Central Television, reported on the anti-PX movement in Xiamen, it not only criticized the lack of public communication organized by local governments but also praised the local Party committee and the government bodies for prioritizing people’s interests by voluntarily giving up the PX project, thus promoting the credibility of the government (Brady, 2008).
Based on above discussions, the use of media platforms as a social practice is fundamentally shaped and modified by people and organizations, by their interests, habits, and projects (Jost et al., 2018). In this sense, the casting of mass media and collective action as a conflict is inadequate to understand collective action because, from the perspective of activists and organizations, they are satisfied, provided the strategic use of media platforms results in attainment of their goals, and whether these platforms are owned by government, activists, or other private entities is immaterial. Given that mass media organizations in authoritarian contexts face pressure to achieve business goals and have autonomous spaces for positive coverage, it is thus unclear whether they will unquestioningly toe the government’s line on collective action. Therefore, a better theoretical perspective is to consider the complementarity among different types of media resources in attaining the goals of activists and media organizations.

Resource complementarity between social media and mass media

Resource types and attributes. In the traditional theory of collective behavior, participants in social movements are considered irrational. Participation in social movements is due to deprivation, indignation, being bewitched, or instigated (D. Zhao, 2006). Conversely, RMT regards participants as rational actors and neither grievance nor instigation is sufficient to trigger social movements (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The key to the success or failure of social movements depends on the ability to mobilize resources. Accordingly, RMT’s core theoretical concern is what resources are needed for social movements and how to mobilize them (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). RMT is an appropriate theoretical framework to understand atomized activism for two reasons. First, RMT adopts a broader view of media impact by evaluating how media are adopted by activists and organizations instead of narrowly focusing on the characteristics of the media itself. Second, RMT identifies different categories of resources that are necessary for successful social movements, allowing a more sophisticated analysis of the relationships between social media and mass media in atomized activism through understanding how the resource attributes of different types of media are strategically utilized by activists and media organizations.

According to the RMT literature, there are five basic interconnected categories of resources: human resources (e.g. participants), material resources (e.g. venues), social organizational resources (e.g. public infrastructure), moral resources (e.g. legitimacy, sympathetic support), and cultural resources (e.g. familiarity with the suggested issue) (Edwards & Kane, 2014; Edwards & McCarthy, 2007). These categories of resources can be further classified based on their proprietary and fungibility attributes (Edwards & Kane, 2014). The proprietary attribute indicates the ease and extent to which the resource may be accessed by organizers, while the fungibility attribute refers to how interchangeable the resource is to any social movement or the extent to which the resource is context-dependent. The proprietary and fungibility attributes of the six resources combined with Edwards and Kane’s (2014) original five-category categorization are presented in Table 1.
A social movement is composed of a large number of participants who are collectively present in a limited area at the same time (Sedwell, 2001). Human resources are crucial to any type of social movement and can be mobilized in various ways, such as through incentive-based recruitment and personal social networks. Therefore, human resources under the RMT framework are less proprietary and more fungible because it is easy to access human resources by tapping into the social networks of the participants, and it does not matter much who the participant is and to whose network the participant belongs. On the contrary, material resources are more proprietary and less fungible, as many material goods such as money and activity space are properties owned by specific individuals or organizations that might not consent to support social movements with such resources (Edwards & Kane, 2014; Edwards & McCarthy, 2007). However, material goods are not a prerequisite for all movements given the booming trend of digital activism. Participants can employ tactics such as mass emails as long as they have Internet access (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), thus material items are often context-based. Similarly, social organizational resources, such as the public transportation proprietarily operated by a local government, are confined to the limited geographical areas in which they are situated and, therefore, are less fungible. In the case of moral resources, these often originate outside of a social movement and are controlled and bestowed by external sources known to possess them. These moral resources are extremely important in resisting the counter-movement voices and maintaining the inter-group solidarity, especially during later phases of any movements (Pfaff & Yang, 2001). Conversely, cultural resources are less proprietary as the objective expertise could be obtained from various sources. It is also less fungible because understanding and familiarity with certain issues do not necessarily help organize activism based on other topics. Therefore, cultural resources have fewer exchange values than those more fundamental and prominent resources, such as people and money.

In addition to the above five categories, we also propose the addition of a sixth category of frame resources. Culture and frame resources are interconnected. Cultural resources are static and objective. They are always there, like the knowledge in the textbook. Frame resources extend cultural resources by emphasizing the active interpretation and reconfiguration of cultural resources by activists, mapping the objective knowledge with specific contexts and goals of activism. Frame resources are crucial for atomized actions in China. Due to the relatively weaker mobilizing capacities of individuals, contentious frames and narratives are the most available and convenient resources for individuals to achieve mobilization (Cai, 2010; Zhou & Yang, 2018). Therefore, activists’ interpretations of their predicaments and their weaving of these interpretations into narrative media frames become an important mobilization resource to overcome any structural mobilization disadvantage.

Frame resources can be further divided into issue-based or theme-based. For individual-initiated actions, they may invoke issue-based frames through stories based on their exclusive experiences, narratives, and understandings, such as the frame of “protecting the homeland and ancestors” in the anti-eviction movement in China (Zheng et al., 2015). Thus, issue-based frame resources are more proprietary to the individual activist but also less fungible because there is no overarching theme, which results in frames that are not significantly applicable to other types of movements. Conversely, certain professional institutions (e.g. social movement organizations (SMOs), media organizations) manage to unite ideologies, values, or goals by transforming collective movement goals and strategies, and they expand their mobilization scale through thematic frames. For instance, the three most frequent overarching frames adopted by Chinese mass media when reporting contentious actions are family-centered traditional values, the nostalgia of the socialism or Mao era, and the pursuit of democracy and human rights (S. Chen, 2017; Zheng et al., 2015; Zhou
& Yang, 2018). Such overarching theme-based frames employed by media organizations serve as flexible bridges to mobilize different groups of potential allies, thus re-utilizing the discursive legacies of previous actions (D. Zhao, 2006). These theme-based frame resources are less proprietary and more fungible because they can be easily applied to different collective movements.

**Mobilizing resources through social and mass media.** Social media has mostly manifested its effectiveness in terms of human, culture, and frame mobilizations. It has profoundly transformed the ways in which we communicate and cultivate social ties with one another (Ellison et al., 2007). In the real world, the cost of maintaining reciprocal relations with participants constrains mobilization efforts, but the non-reciprocity afforded by social media networks functions as a tool to raise awareness and mobilize new participants (Lerman & Ghosh, 2010). Social media facilitates direct appeal to potential participants, allowing them to bypass mass media gatekeepers. In this way, social media provides activists with the freedom to articulate their individual ideologies and frame their causes, with the added benefit of inspiring activists through participant feedback.

However, mass media is likely to be the decisive factor when the collective actions intensify. As the collective actions progress, pressure from authorities or a skeptical public dampens the motivation of participants (S. Wang, 2008). Thus, the increasingly higher risks of collective action require credible media organizations to confer higher levels of legitimacy, commitment, and trust to maintain the vitality of the campaign (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Lee, 2015; Mercea, 2012). Moreover, mass media remains important to enlarge the scope and depth of the actions. Social media generally attracts homogeneous groups (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), but gaining the support of the masses with diverse opinions requires the mass media. Finally, the entertainment-oriented information on social media could lessen the gravity of the issue (Curran et al., 2012; Hill, 2011). Many participants in collective action may not be aware of the reasons behind the collective action (Clark, 2012). The issue-based frames in social media at the early stages of collective action may evoke heated discussions, but mass media unifies the collective action’s raison d’être through theme-based frames.

From the above discussion, by considering the mass media and social media as resources with fungible and proprietary characteristics, analysis of the use of different media platforms in collective action and mobilization moves beyond a simple analysis of the properties of each media platform to examining how the different platforms complement one another as resources for mobilization. Many studies (e.g. Lee, 2015) on RMT have explored the conversion of different types of resources. However, few have considered how cross-category exchanges between resources that vary in fungible and proprietary attributes occur over the course of collective action and mobilization. In addition, how these exchanges exploit the loopholes in the current Chinese media system also requires examination. In the following section, we address these exchanges using a Chinese case study.

**Method and data**

The political “IBC” that occurred in Guangzhou, China, in August 2014 is the selected atomized activism case study. Materials for this study include data gathered from the main activist’s Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) account and news coverage of the campaigns derived from the electronic news archive *Wise News* (the Chinese equivalent of Factiva). We selected “IBC,” “Han,” and “Guangzhou” as keywords to collect news reports that are relevant to the case, and 234 mainland Chinese newspaper reports from 30 August to 6 September 2014 were returned. These newspaper
reports span 19 different news organizations, including city-level newspapers in Guangzhou and other cities, province-level newspapers in Guangdong, and newspapers affiliated to central government. However, only the Guangdong and Guangzhou newspapers conducted original reporting and covered Han’s action closely.

Nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with approved audio recording were conducted from 2014 to 2016 with various key parties involved in this atomized activism case study (see their information in the Appendix). We recruited these informants through our personal connections. One interviewee is the main activist, one is a government staff member in Baiyun Mountain Bureau, three are reporters from the mass media, and the rest are observers who personally witnessed the atomized activism. In the case of the main activist of the campaign, the interviews focused on his political experience as an activist and his strategies to mobilize resources through different media platforms. For the government staff, the questions centered on the reasons for his bureau supporting the activism. The interviews with the reporters centered on their thoughts regarding the relationship between media and activism and why they covered the atomized activism. Participants were asked for their assessment of the effectiveness and meanings of the activist’s endeavor. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

After transcribing the audio recording, we conducted first-level and second-level coding according to a deductive thematic approach (Saldaña, 2009). The first-level analysis focused on what was “present” in interviewees’ responses. The codes summarized from the first level were descriptive, shedding light on what and how resources were mobilized during the campaign. Thereafter, the second-level coding served to theorize and categorize the initial codings based on the types and attributes of resources introduced in the literature. We also employed open coding so that other new and interesting themes could emerge from the data. When interview data contradicted with materials in the news report, we conducted further interviews to address the inconsistency.

IBC as political atomized action

In 2014, the IBC originated in the United States that summer and swept the globe through social media. The event sought to raise donations for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) patients. The challenge involved the filming of an individual who had a bucket of ice and water dumped onto the head, and that individual then challenges three other people to both complete the same act within 24 hours and make a donation to the ALS Association (Trejos, 2017).

In August of the same year, the IBC became extremely popular across China. As of 20 August 2014, there had been more than 600 million Weibo posts related to IBC (L. Wang, 2014). In the city of Guangzhou, a local activist named Han launched a political version of the IBC at Baiyun Mountain. The original challenge was about donations, but Han’s IBC was political because he tacked on a request to local government officials to address and offer solutions to social issues. Han’s action pressured these officials greatly because a number of celebrities, opinion leaders, journalists from government-backed media, and government officials had publicly showed their support and participated in the IBC 10 days before Han’s campaign, conferring the IBC great social legitimacy (Sohu, 2014). Public sentiment on Weibo also pressured Chinese government officials to be more open-minded about grassroots action (L. Wang, 2014). It was socially and politically difficult for the Guangzhou officials to not accept the challenge.

After successfully completing the challenge, he named the directors of the Guangzhou Bureau of Commodity Prices, Guangzhou Bureau of Water Affairs, and Guangzhou Health and Family Planning Commission, respectively, to take the baton and to also offer solutions to rising commodity
prices, the pollution of the Pearl River, and to explain how budget earmarked for social support was disbursed. The Water Affairs director initially promised to support ALS patients and improve the quality of water affairs work on 4 September 2014, but he did not donate money to the ALS Association nor clarify the issue of the contamination of the Pearl River. The following day, the Health and Family Planning Commission and Commodity Prices directors, respectively, expressed their willingness to respect the rules of the game, donate US$100 to the ALS Association and to answer Han’s inquiries through Weibo (Kong, 2014).

**Weibo mobilization**

According to the rules of the IBC, an individual who successfully completes the challenge has the right to name the next challenge participant. The right to name the next participants is conferred by social consent and even public officials in China face strong social pressure to obey the rules of the challenge, given its popularity. Therefore, the activist Han saw the IBC as an effective means to pressurize local officials to respond more efficiently to public inquiries on socio-political issues, and he launched a campaign that exploited the momentum of the IBC to achieve his aim of increasing the accountability of local officials to the local population:

> If I follow the routine procedure of submitting a proposal, it usually takes two to three months to get a reply. However, after launching the campaign, I only have to wait for a few days to get a response, so why should I use the traditional way of making political inquiry? (Han, personal communication, 2015)

The strategic use of the right to name the next participants of the IBC was central to his campaign. After publicly accepting the IBC when challenged by his friend on Weibo, Han used Weibo to request netizens for names of government officials whom he could name to be the next IBC participants. By creatively leveraging the IBC, Han’s self-initiated campaign aroused great interest among netizens, who readily proffered suggestions and discussed who should be nominated next, inspiring Han (personal communication, 2015) about how he should execute his campaign:

> After posting this request, I realize that they are so active and intelligent, which also benefits me a lot . . . For some tricky questions, I may also @ my good friends on Weibo. Some of them work in governments, and some are experienced activists. They help me strike a balance between the timeliness and significance of selected issues.

Within 24 hours after posting his request on whom Han should name as the next participant of the IBC, over 200 comments, private messages, and suggestions were received. Of these suggestions, Han selected three names that he would target as the next course of action. From an RMT perspective, Han was clearly using social media as a form of mobilization culture and a human resource. By posting the request to name the next participants of the challenge on social media, social users were mobilized to conduct public brainstorming and generate collective intelligence. Han aligned the significance and timeliness of public concerns with his own interests. In this sense, Han’s existing supporters acquired awareness of his atomized activism, which is more proprietary and less fungible, through social media. The social media platform Weibo, under Han’s directive, is a low-cost, high-efficiency, and proprietary space for studying online opinion and engaging in discussions with social media participants, thus fortifying Han’s expertise and resulting in the initial solidification of social alliances.
Selection of offline action space

In addition to soliciting suggestions for naming the next participants of the IBC, Han also used social media to mobilize material resources to carry out the IBC. On 30 August 2014, the Director-General of Baiyun Mountain Administration (BMA) contacted Han to provide him with a public square to carry out the campaign. The next day, Han announced on Weibo that he would accept the IBC at Baiyun Mountain Square at 10:00 on 1 September 2014, and at that time, he would nominate the three public officials to follow up as the next participants of the IBC on the Baiyun Mountain site:

Baiyun Mountain has a special meaning for Han and our bureau was constructed partly due to his proposal in 2008. Moreover, he’s pleading for justice on behalf of the people, so it’s quite natural for us to support him both for the good of common citizens and his intellectual contribution to our bureau. (BMA staff A, personal communication, 2015)

The purpose of selecting Baiyun Mountain is to have a sensational effect and bring more citizens to focus on livelihood issues. (Han, personal communication, 2016)

Baiyun Mountain is a landmark in the city of Guangzhou and it means a lot to Han. In 2008, the “Vehicle Restriction on Baiyun Mountain” proposal was finally adopted by the local government after Han’s persistent advocacy for 3 consecutive years. As a result, the local people were free from the disturbance of vehicles when they exercised on Baiyun Mountain and the Administration Bureau of Baiyun Mountain was constructed. During his mobilization of material resource, a special form of human resource emerged: guanxi (personal connection). Guanxi is one of the most interesting and unique features of social interaction in China. By establishing guanxi with someone else, the other party is implicitly agreeing also to be available to reciprocate when the need arises (Lin, 2001). Since the Baiyun Mountain Bureau was constructed largely because of Han’s proposal, the bureau owned Han a “debt” that needs to be reciprocated. Therefore, when BMA staff were made aware of Han’s intention to accept the IBC at a public space, the staff readily provided that material resource. Although the material resource has a proprietary character and is ordinarily out of most activists’ reach, guanxi provided an informal way for Han to access the resource. In the Chinese context, guanxi plays an important role overcoming obstacles to proprietary resource mobilization.

Material resources also have their semiotic dimension. Selecting a political site is also a way of arousing attention and encoding meanings. Mountain squares are usually not the site for political discussion or contention in China, but political inquiry in squares in the context of China, especially those that are famous, has conferred legitimacy to socio-political issues, increasing public awareness political engagement rights in public spaces. Leisure sites such as mountains, as a rule, do not serve as a political engagement platform for citizens. However, the arrival of activists unexpectedly transforms them into venues of political inquiry on camera; the dramatic changes in the meaning of a leisure site and the awkwardness of public officials in dealing with this new situation also highlight the rights of citizens in political participation and supervision (Pan & Yu, 2015). However, these latent meanings are difficult to articulate on Weibo and ordinary citizens generally do not grasp the significance of these meanings. Therefore, the use of social media to choose the political site of Baiyun Mountain acted as an issue-based frame resource for Han to mobilize citizens for his specific cause.
The follow-up by mass media

The IBC campaign was covered in 234 newspaper articles. Although Han’s IBC centered on a trending topic, what really made the challenge gain significant traction among the local population was mass media coverage by local provincial and municipal newspapers. For the journalists working in city-level mass media, Han’s creative use of the IBC was worth covering because the local government’s response is what is truly newsworthy to them:

What our media really are concerned about are Han’s list of names, his rationales and how these subjects will respond. (B, personal communication, 2016)

It doesn’t matter if he pours the ice bucket; the more important thing is that our government would give more response to public opinions. (C, personal communication, 2016)

Han also admitted that although he initiated the campaign, if the local mass media did not provide coverage, he would not have been able to mobilize as many people for his cause:

Without the support from the mass media, it might just be a “solo play”. (Han, personal communication, 2016)

As shown in Figure 1, after the “mystery revealing” moment, the number of interactions on the official Weibo accounts of local mass media spiked despite a decline in activity on Han’s Weibo account. Social media as a mobilization resource resulted in an initial rise in public interest but subsequently decreased; it would have been impossible to force the public officials to respond to Han’s atomized action without the follow-up by the mass media. The local mass media gave Han extensive coverage after he named the three officials. For example, province-level mass media News Press and Pearl River TV followed this campaign for a few days:

This topic can be examined from several perspectives, including public charity, rare disease treatment and political disclosures, and the rationales why Han selected these officials, issues and the space of action. We can cover these perspectives at length and in depth, and it’s to our advantage. (D, personal communication, 2016)
Consistent with the analysis of mass media coverage as shown in Figure 2, newspaper coverage related to Han’s atomized activism spanned eight different perspectives. The Director of Water Affairs’ initial negative response to Han’s inquiry attracted great attention from the mass media. Moreover, that period coincided with the central government’s strong push to increase the transparency of governing (Wen, 2013), which was also a key theme of Han’s campaign. The initial stonewalling by the local government gave the local mass media a compelling reason for sustained coverage of Han’s atomized action as part of public accounting to force officials into pronouncing their positions.

The mass media supported Han’s action not only through meaningful and in-depth frame interpretation behind the IBC but also through frame bridging and integration. When the mass media covered Han’s case, they tended to combine two or more related cases that share similar ideologies and identities (see Kaidi Data, 2014). A group experiencing a strong sense of resentment or deprivation needs a unifying ideological or theoretical frame consistent with their resentment or deprivation (D. Zhao, 2006). Media coverage of such atomized activism thus provides fungible and overarching themes that rally supporters of other atomized actions behind Han. With strong support from the local mass media, Han was able to sustain public interest in the topic and maintained the intensity of “external pressure” through frequent mass media coverage, which in turn led to the more positive responses from the other two directors on 5 September 2014:

We are simply pushing Guangzhou government to do what it should have done . . . We know that the government does not want to see that we stand with activists, but it cannot prevent it. Our coverage is reasonable and it is the government who violated the regulations of information disclosure first. (D, personal communication, 2016)

The media’s positive and comprehensive coverage of Han’s action was based both on its power at the provincial or municipal level and requirements of functional transformation and institutional
reform from the central government. Since the three nominees were officials at the lower municipal level, provincial-level media organizations had power to supervise them. Moreover, in the *Report on Government Work* in the First Session of 12th National People’s Congress, Prime Minister Wen explicitly urged local cadres to pay attention to and improve people’s livelihood so as to enhance people’s sense of well-being (Wen, 2013). Local governments are required to focus on responding to people’s livelihood concerns, reflecting a shift from the performance legitimacy of the government at the macro-economical level to the livelihood legitimacy. In this sense, mass media in Guangzhou found a pocket of structural space to cover Han’s endeavor (Y. Wang, 2012; Xia & Yuan, 2014). Following the logic of “rightful resistance” (O’Brien & Li, 2006), mass media skillfully took advantage of the central government’s new directive as carte blanche to cover contentious local issues and supervise local cadres engaging in deviant behavior.

**Anchoring the essence of the campaign by mass media**

Apart from fading public attention on social media, another core obstacle that Han faced was the legitimacy of his campaign and whether it was sufficiently representative of the local population’s views of the local government. Even if Han had intended that the campaign be interpreted in a framework of civil rights, there was no guarantee that the local population would automatically agree, as evident from the views of two observers who had personally witnessed Han’s IBC at Baiyun Mountain:

> The place where he puts his performance stage is exactly the best spot for the city view and photography. Even if you are passionate about public issues, you shouldn’t achieve your ambitions at the expense of our sightseeing. We family members drive a long way here and we are not here for you. (E, personal communication, 2016)

> We Chinese are inclined to have blind faith in foreign things. Naive Han, do something more meaningful for us and do not take the opportunity to cause trouble. (F, personal communication, 2016)

In essence, the general weakness of atomized action is that it is unlikely to gain a sufficiently large group of supporters to form a strong, unified community due to its fragmented and issue-based characteristics that are unlikely to initially resonate with diverse groups (Cai, 2010; Sheng, 2017). The mass media, therefore, performed the role of unifying the diverse opinions of the local population and helping to mobilize them to support Han’s cause:

> No matter what Han has done, we should be more concerned about his initial aim and the effectiveness of the action. If his campaign has made the public more aware of the condition of ALS and stimulated a better policy, even if it is an entertaining show, so what? (Pearl, 2014)

> If our officials are still stuck in the mode of governance in previous years, i.e., no response or leave it aside until the intervention of superior leaders, how could the capacity of our public governance adapt to the ever-increasing right-based consciousness? . . . After all, it’s also a good way to shape a positive image of our government. (Xie, 2014)

As shown in Figure 3, among all 234 news articles, the second largest proportion of articles demonstrate Han defending his cause in response to critical and dissenting views. The legitimacy
and appropriateness of the atomized action cannot be conferred merely by self-claim or personal effort; the endorsement of a credible third party is essential, especially when performative practices result in controversy. The negative reactions of some observers to Han’s public performance of the IBC suggest controversy regarding his cause, which could have resulted in the lack of traction. The mass media, however, focused on explaining Han’s initial aims and generously allowed Han to explain and defend his rationale, sustaining the momentum of Han’s atomized activism through clarification of the essence of the action and reasons why the activist’s persistence was appropriate and valuable.

Clearly, Han’s personal grievances with regard to local officials would likely not have materialized into a wider collective movement without the resource mobilization capabilities of mass media. Often in China, local governments are unwilling to address the grievances of its citizens outside of established, formal channels (S. Wang, 2008). In addition, mobilization of social media resources to drive collective action requires strong virality, which is difficult to achieve, especially for the fragmented nature of the public sphere in China; individual grievances embedded in local contexts narrowly appeal only to particular local groups (Lei, 2017). Therefore, it is easy for governments to ignore social media–driven atomized actions.

However, the probability of atomized activism covered by mass media being ignored by local governments is much lower because of an apparently counter-intuitive reason. China has one of the world’s most restrictive mass media. However, as a result, news that is actually published by Chinese mass media is deemed to be implicitly sanctioned precisely because that news made it to press despite strict governmental controls (Y. Zhao, 2000, 2008). Therefore, mass media in the Chinese context as a mobilization resource is very valuable because rigorous gatekeeping increases news coverage scarcity. Therefore, for Chinese activists such as Han, mass media is an extremely important mobilization resource because of the legitimacy that is implicitly conferred on their cause, resulting in a greater likelihood of success for atomized activism.

Furthermore, media coverage on Han’s action was tolerated by the local government not only because it conformed to the new central government directive, but also because of the media’s strategic topic selection and framing. Mass media in Guangzhou regardless of level had been covering hot-button issues like river pollution that were of great concern to the government and the public, which the Guangzhou government promised to solve (Xie, 2014). The media employed

![Figure 3. Main topics related to Han in mass media coverage.](image)
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pro-government frames and discourse in legitimizing Han’s action (e.g. Han’s endeavor was to improve the government’s image). The media’s supervision is consistent with the interests of the local government. Instead of an antagonistic approach, the mass media raised questions and sought solutions. The incorporation of grassroot voices helps the local government to build unity, release social pressure, increase awareness and understanding, resolve potential conflicts, and give participants a sense of hope that everything will be fine (Brady, 2008; Li & Long, 2017). Through framing, local mass media aligned their market-oriented profit-maximization interests with the local government’s public pacification interests.

Discussion and conclusion

The authoritarian style of China’s governance is inhospitable for collective action. The CCP’s strong grip on authority limits freedom of association, speech, and information flow (Z. Chen, 2017). Moreover, due to the fragmented nature of public sphere in China, the interests of groups are severely splintered, making consensus on specific issues difficult (Lei, 2017). Given such challenging conditions, the empowerment and linkage functions of social and mass media are particularly crucial for the success of collective action in China.

The case study illustrates that both the social and mass media in China can facilitate the success of atomized activism by mobilizing resources with different types and attributes. Social media in atomized activism is used to mobilize timely and less fungible resources, in other words, existing allies (including guanxi), material resources, cultural resources, and issue-based frame resources. As these resources are personalized and limited to specific contexts, they are unique and generally do not feature across collective movements and cannot maintain their effectiveness for extended periods (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Lee, 2015). Therefore, mass media manifests its significance in later phases by sustaining the intensity of external pressures through the mobilizing of a larger number of audiences, interpreting the main causes of the activist and anchoring the essence of the atomized activism. Resources such as increased manpower, moral resources, and theme-based frame resources can be applied to a wider range of collective movements and are far more enduring than the resources mobilized by social media, but they are not easily available, thus enjoying scarcity and monopoly. In essence, the mass media’s alliance with social media–driven atomized activism in China is a reconfiguration process of exchanging monopolized resources with exclusive resources to achieve the organization’s political and business aims.

Whether the mass media dare to cover contentious activism is determined to a large extent by the nature of the activism and the strategies of the activist. Faced with high risk of being arrested and low level of organizational support, the basic tactic for powerless individuals to organize collective action is to take the advantage of proprietary discursive tools and appeal to the moral authority of local officials (Cai, 2010; Fu, 2017; Sheng, 2017; Zhou & Yang, 2018). This leads to the emergence of a special mode of discourse which we call “implied truth” appearing in current atomized activism in China. Implied truth refers to reasonable goals, appeals, and meanings that implicitly drive atomized activism and are not expressly articulated. There are three features associated with the implied truth: justifiability, lack of clarity, and adaptability.

The most important premise of implied truth is that it is justified. The truths that Han did not explicitly articulate but justifies his activism included the political meanings of Baiyun Mountain, the reasons why the nominees should respond to Han’s request, and the rationales of selecting those officials. Han’s past political experience and achievements, the internationally accepted rules of IBC and the public’s discussion under Han’s Weibo are also additional implied truths justifying
his activism. Given that implied truth is rooted in veracity, when activists justify their causes by adopting implied truth in framing their activism, they provide mass media a legitimate reason to cover their activism.

Implied truth also deliberately lacks clarity. Only those possessing sufficient background knowledge of Han or IBC can fully comprehend the meaning of Han’s activism. While this attribute has an obviously protective effect in an authoritarian context where speech is tightly regulated, it may lead to a misfire effect. For instance, Han’s action in Baiyun Mountain was regarded as a practice of wasting public resources and showing off by some observers. The failure of implied truth to work as intended may result in heated and multi-dimensional debates that require the intervention of the mass media to coalesce public opinion. The deliberate lack of clarity offered by implied truth offers protection from severe government repercussions for both individual activists and media organizations by increasing the latitude of ambiguity without sacrificing the actual intended meaning.

Finally, implied truth is essentially a way of adapting to power rather than challenging it. This discursive mode allows grievances to be expressed without direct confrontation with authority (Cai, 2010). It is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese civic culture where people prefer to avoid extremes or absolutes on account of the concept of “moderation” (zhongyong). Implied truth silently articulated what the local government should have done (e.g. transparency in governance) in a non-confrontational manner. As such, by engaging in implied truth, an appropriate balance between citizens’ grievances, mass media’s pursuit of profitable and newsworthy information, and the government’s need to improve its relationship with citizens is struck. Mass media was thus more willing to offer more fungible and enduring resources to activists because the discourse of implied truth offered mass media the ability to adapt to power, allowing profitable news coverage of an alternative and controversial issue without antagonizing the government.

In conclusion, atomized activism in authoritarian contexts can succeed if the activist is shrewd in the use of both social media and mass media. Although the mass media in authoritarian contexts mostly have to toe the government’s line, we have shown that they too have vested self-interests in terms of readership and performing the duty of supervision. They are willing to cross the line to promote controversial atomized activism causes if given sufficient political cover through the discourse of implied truth, which, from an RMT perspective, then allows activists in authoritarian contexts a viable strategy to leverage on the power of the mass media as a means to mobilize resources to extend their reach to the wider masses. In the context of China, although the mass media and activists face severe constraints, both parties can subvert authoritarian control and avoid repercussions to achieve their respective aims so long as they dance carefully in tandem to the tune of implied truth.

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Notes

1. Interactive intensity in Figure 1 represents the number of likes, comments, and retweets of posts posted on different dates on Weibo. Han’s interactive intensity was calculated based on his 10 posts relevant to the activism from 27 August to 6 September 2014. The interactive intensity of the mass media
was calculated based on related 19 posts of local mass media’s official accounts from 29 August to 6 September 2014, including News Press, Pearl TV, Nanfang Daily, Yangcheng Evening News, and Information Times. We conducted the calculation work on 5 January 2016.

2. In Figure 2, we first collected all of news articles from Wise News. Then we counted the frequency of appearances of related names or titles by key word searches and calculated the proportion of each news subject.

3. Figure 3 represents the main topics related to Han in each news article. A group of three graduate students who majored in communication were trained to carry out the coding work. The team first highlighted all the sentences containing Han’s name in 234 news articles and then finalized the coding themes after two-round reading and discussion. The training and coding process was run from 8 January to 15 January 2016 on a subset of 30 articles. After each round, the inter-coder reliability was calculated. Based on the results of the reliability check, the team leader reconciled the disagreements in cooperation with the other two coders in face-to-face meetings. Items with low reliability were discussed in detail until an acceptable level of agreement was reached. After the training process, we randomly selected 10% of the articles to test the inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.79$), which was satisfactory.

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**Appendix.** Basic information of interviewees.

| Age group | Education      | Location       | Occupation                                      | Date of interview  |
|-----------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| **Activist** |                |                |                                               |                    |
| Han       | 61–65          | Bachelor       | Guangzhou                                     | Retired            |
|           |                |                |                                               | 20 December 2015   |
|           |                |                |                                               | 5 January 2016     |
|           |                |                |                                               | 3 July 2017        |
| **Governmental institution** |    |                |                                               |                    |
| A         | 31–35          | Bachelor       | Guangzhou                                     | Cadre in the Bureau of Baiyun Mountain |
|           |                |                |                                               | 21 December 2015   |
| **Journalists** |    |                |                                               |                    |
| B         | 26–30          | Bachelor       | Guangzhou                                     | Journalist         |
|           |                |                |                                               | 8 January 2016     |
| C         | 31–35          | Master         | Guangzhou                                     | Journalist         |
|           |                |                |                                               | 7 January 2016     |
| D         | 31–35          | Bachelor       | Guangzhou                                     | Editor             |
|           |                |                |                                               | 7 January 2016     |
| **Observers** |    |                |                                               |                    |
| E         | 51–55          | Junior college | Guangzhou                                     | Housewife          |
|           |                |                |                                               | 5 March 2016       |
| F         | 36–40          | Bachelor       | Guangzhou                                     | Engineer           |
|           |                |                |                                               | 12 March 2016      |
| G         | 56–60          | High school    | Guangzhou                                     | Farmer             |
|           |                |                |                                               | 13 March 2016      |
| H         | 41–45          | Bachelor       | Guangzhou                                     | Businessman        |
|           |                |                |                                               | 5 March 2016       |