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Zixue Tai
University of Kentucky, ztai2@uky.edu

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Article

Social Media and Contentious Action: The Use and Users of QQ Groups in China

Zixue Tai

School of Journalism and Media, University of Kentucky, USA; ztai2@uky.edu

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of a netnographic study of QQ groups engaged in contentious activities in China. Informed primarily by semi-structured in-depth interviews of 34 participants and field observations through years of grounded research, the findings shed light on the communicative dynamics and mobilization strategies of QQ groups in nurturing contentious action and motivating mass participation in social protest. In-group communication stays highly focused on the respective mission of the groups, and it cultivates a sense of shared awareness conducive to collective action. There is also a noticeable contagion effect that transfers the spirit of contestation in terms of speech and action. Mobilizing dynamics in the QQ groups point to a hybrid model of activist-brokered networks, which crosscuts and interconnects elements in Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) prototype of self-organizing networks and organizationally brokered networks. Group leaders and activists resort to a multi-layered mechanism to dissipate contentious information and to mobilize participation in protests.

Keywords

China; collective action; connective action; QQ groups; social media; social protest

Issue

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1. Introduction

Social media have been a leading force of technological innovation and social change in China in the new millennium. Although popular platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are banned from Chinese virtual territories, home-grown technologies have made themselves a ubiquitous presence in people's everyday lives. This research focuses on the role of QQ, an instant-messaging service developed by Tencent, in collective contention. More specifically, our investigation pertains to the use of QQ groups for mobilizing and coordinating mass protests in China. After a review of relevant literature in the context of social media use and collective action, the article reports the findings of our years-long ethnographic research coupled with in-depth interviews of four QQ user groups exclusively dedicated to contentious action, with emphasis on administration

of group interaction, organization mechanics, and mobilization strategies. Special attention is paid to how individual and collective circumstances shape group dynamics. In particular, the article draws attention to the emergence of a new type of organization mechanism as enabled through activist-brokered networks in empowering mass contention. Through the conceptual lens of academic research in cross-national settings, its discussion is grounded in the broad socio-political and online environment in China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mass Protest and Popular Contention in China

China boasts a long history of robust and oftentimes turbulent popular protest from ancient to contemporary times (Perry, 2015). Economic reform and liberalization in

recent decades have unshackled diverse patterns of conflict and resentment embedded in convoluted sociopolitical and economic relationships. As a result, contentious and transgressive activities ranging from property/land rights to labor relations and environmental protection have surged in the past three decades, transitioning China into a “contentious authoritarianism” in which “a strong authoritarian regime accommodates widespread and routinized collective protests” (Chen, 2012, p. 189).

There are two countervailing approaches in the Chinese authorities’ handling of contentious politics. On the one hand, social stability has been acclaimed as a hallmark achievement by the ruling Chinese Communist Party, and *weiwen* (stability maintenance) has been a top priority for the state autocracy (Scoggins, 2018). Consequently, minimization of mass protests and public grievances (either through preemptive elimination or peaceful resolution) has been an important benchmark in awarding promotion to government officials (Mirić & Pechenkina, 2022). On the other hand, there is tolerance for and responsiveness to—albeit limited—public dissent and protests of aggrieved citizens, and the official measure may range from reconciliation to co-optation and brutal suppression, depending on the nature of the demands and issues at hand (Li, 2019). This “power of instability” as a multipronged mechanism of grievance management gives leverage to defuse conflictual state-society relations into material and symbolic concessions for the parties involved (Lee & Zhang, 2013). The tendency of the Chinese regime to constantly reconsolidate and reconstitute itself in the face of contestations and hold on to power is summarized in the perspectives of “authoritarian resilience” (Sinkkonen, 2021) and “responsive authoritarianism” (Marquis & Bird, 2018), which argue that the authoritarian regime develops the ability to adjust and adapt by allowing a degree of political participation and feedback on contentious issues.

2.2. Social Media and Connective Action

The mainstreaming of online networks in routine life has fundamentally redefined the contours of collective action and social movements (Treré, 2018). The latest waves of social media innovation have pushed digital activism to ever new territories and have expanded the repertoire of formations in which dispersed individuals and formal groups collaborate and coordinate efforts to contemplate, mobilize, and organize contentious action (Kavada & Poell, 2021; Margetts et al., 2015). As noted by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), networked technologies in the digital era have become pivotal to the mobilization and staging of collective action, and, consequently, there has been a dramatic shift from the conventional logic of collective action grounded in the organization-centered and leader-driven mode of resource mobilization to the emerging model of the *logic of connective action* in which “taking public action or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression

and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp. 752–753).

The logic of connective action enables fragmented populations and marginal groups that are hard to reach by formal organizations to mobilize protest networks and coordinate contentious activities via distributed peer-production. Based on the distinct logic of organization and action formations, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) propose a three-part typology of large-scale connective action networks: self-organizing networks, organizationally enabled networks, and organizationally brokered networks. Each ideal model involves different action frames, communication patterns, and organizational actors. Crosscutting all three types is the pivotal role of digital network technologies. In this regard, social media enriches the repertoire of popular contention through power activation (e.g., mobilizing diverse, unequally distributed resources among powerless and marginal groups) and power accrual (e.g., sustaining activism over time) in the absence of strong organizational actors (Leong et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant to the authoritarian polity in China, where formal organizations and institutional establishments tend to align with state power and government interests and cannot be expected to serve as reliable mobilizing channels of contentious actions.

2.3. Organization and Mobilization Dynamics

Classic social movement theory places significant emphasis on the role of formal organizations and clearly identifiable leadership in the mobilizing process (Tilly, 1978). Traditionally, one of the biggest challenges for the underprivileged and the resource-poor to organize collective action has been the lack of efficient and effective means of mobilization. This has drastically changed with the mass diffusion of social networks as manifested via social media. In fact, it is under the premise of personalized communication via digital media networks that the above-mentioned logic of connective action is differentiated from that of conventional collective action. As Gerbaudo (2012) shows through his research on the Arab Spring movement, protest mobilization in the era of social media has become horizontal, decentralized, fluid, self-nurturing, and instantaneous.

It however should not be taken to suggest that contention via social media no longer needs or benefits from leadership. Rather, it means that leadership can be enacted anonymously—unidentifiable, faceless, positionless, and detached from any individuals. Poell et al. (2016) insist that leadership remains important in contemporary protest, both off- and online: “Facilitated by social media, this mode of leadership revolves around *inviting, connecting, steering, and stimulating*, rather than *directing, commanding, and proclaiming*” (Poell et al., 2016, p. 1009, emphasis in the original). Similar dynamics have been noted in student-led protests in

Nigeria (Uwalaka, 2020). In the case of contentious action in China, tactical and strategic approaches to leadership vary, from leader-orchestrated rural protests (Li & O'Brien, 2008) to leaderless resistance (for avoidance of retribution; Cai, 2010) and "mobilization without masses" (i.e., individuals taking action based on guidance by behind-the-scene civil society organizations; Fu, 2018).

Social media platforms have uplifted grassroots participation in digital activism through their varied affordances and broad spectrum of reach to especially the hitherto marginal and powerless groups in society (Khalil & Storie, 2021; Leong et al., 2019; Sæbø et al., 2020). This is particularly true in empowering popular contention in China, where conventional media resources are highly controlled, and interpersonal networks carry significant weight in enacting collective action (Tai, 2018).

2.4. Social Networking via QQ Groups

QQ, an instant-messaging service released by China's multinational conglomerate Tencent in 1999, allows users to chat, email, file-share, and engage in activities resembling conventional online forums or bulletin-board systems via not only the conventional internet but mobile phones, PDAs, and other emerging platforms as well. A particularly popular feature is QQ Group—whose size may vary from a few hundred to a few thousand—which provides a venue for individuals to engage in members-only communicative tasks and allows users to create tiered levels of user groups serving specific interests, purposes, and needs of communication. As a popular configuration of social networking communication, QQ Group has maintained a high level of penetration among Chinese users, encompassing user groups ranging from chat-focused discussion-heavy hobbyists to movement-oriented activists. Typical QQ Group sizes vary from a few dozen to a few thousand.

A competing social networking service is WeChat, also owned by Tencent, which has evolved into a multi-functional super-app for Chinese users since its debut in 2011. Even though there is substantial overlap between WeChat and QQ in their common technical features, each has also built its distinctive affordances catering to different user needs. In the preliminary stage of our field research, we asked over a dozen individuals who had engaged in contentious activities about their modalities of communication, and the overwhelmingly preferred choice was QQ groups, followed remotely by WeChat. The following affordances of QQ groups (in comparison with WeChat) were driving factors: open-endedness (QQ accounts can be created and anonymized easily), flexibility (QQ groups can be customized in accordance with collective needs), archivability and navigability (it is easy to search and store messages), and transportability (attachments and files can be shared conveniently with members). In particular, it was perceived as a formidable inhibitor for WeChat to limit one account per user/mobile phone, whereas multiple QQ accounts

can be set up without restrictions to fit individual needs. Because WeChat accounts are tied to individual smartphone numbers and are, therefore, easily identifiable, it was cited as a major concern for personal privacy and security in the context of contentious undertakings. On the other hand, while Twitter has been the primary platform for contentious politics in Western democracies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Poell et al., 2016), its Chinese counterpart Sina Weibo received no mention by the activists we preliminarily surveyed.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Goal and Focus

The purpose of our research pertains to the use of QQ groups as a pivotal platform in contemplating and actualizing contention-based collective action in China. Following the established qualitative research practice of aiming to understand people and things in their natural settings (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Charmaz, 2014), our research questions were broadly defined to interrogate the milieu of communicative dynamics and mobilization strategies of QQ groups in nurturing contentious action and motivating mass participation in social protest from initiation to goal-setting to strategizing on-the-ground actions. More specifically, our interrogations center on this core set of questions: How do contentious QQ groups function from member recruitment to routine communication? How do group members reach a consensus and plan contentious activities? What is the role of leadership, if any, in the process? What are the barriers and roadblocks to confounding collective action?

3.2. Field Sites and QQ Groups

We selected four QQ groups for this study, with each affiliated with a specific cause of the protest. As revealed in Table 1, the four types of contentious activities vary in their respective goals with differing levels of difficulty. Our choice of these groups was driven primarily by the consideration that they represent the most common trajectories of popular protest outside of political pursuit in present-day China based on both extant research literature (Chen, 2012; Elfstrom & Li, 2019; Li, 2019; Tai, 2018) and our personal knowledge. Participants in the groups all hail from the southern province of Guangdong (Canton), a leading region of Chinese civic activism.

The first group (henceforth Group A) mostly comprises college faculty and staff in a relatively new area of a metropolis called University City, with its main goal to campaign for the rights of school-age children to a quality education. The construction of University City typifies the national trends of inflated urban sprawl in past decades in which administratively designated areas (development zones, industrial parks, residential complexes) sprang up through government mandates. As a result, these land-centered "place-making" initiatives

Table 1. QQ Groups represented.

Group	Year of Origin	Group Size	Main Issue(s) of Contention	Informants	Target(s) of Contention	Level of Difficulty	Main Participants	Major Activities
College Faculty Group (A)	February 2012	1,275	Public grade school construction and zoning	13	Local (district) government	Low	Faculty and staff from multiple institutions of higher learning, especially those with school-age children and middle-class residents in the same neighborhood	Petitions and appeals (both on- and offline)
Property Buyer Group (B)	February 2015	458	Property rights and sales delivery	6	Real estate developers and local government zoning authorities	Medium	Property buyers under contract with developers and residents who are already in the precincts	Private and public contests, rallies, and protests
Property Owner Group (C)	November 2017	232	Property rights and post-sale services	7	Property management and local government authorities	Medium	Property owners in one precinct that is contracted with the same property management company	Appeals, petitions, rallies, and protests
Environmental Protection Group (D)	February 2014	388	Waste incinerator plant blockage	8	Government at the municipal and local levels	High	Residents in areas that may be affected by the construction of the incinerator project	Appeals, rallies, demonstrations, protests, civil disobedience, and disorderly conduct

have been lucrative sources for local coffers as well as major contributors to GDP growth. However, this rapid sprawl does not necessarily lead to urbanization because corresponding city-building efforts to provide essential services to residents tend to lag behind. Against this backdrop, this QQ group was founded to coordinate and channel public requests to local government authorities demanding the installation of state-of-the-art public-school facilities for families in the area.

One hallmark of China's economic expansion has been the skyrocketing price of real estate properties across the country. The second QQ group (Group B) relates to the domain of the rising tides of "home-owners' activism" (Elfstrom & Li, 2019) and consists of proprietors-to-be for an apartment mix under construction. Construction of the high-rise complexes broke ground by a well-known national developer shortly after it purchased land through public auction in 2014 from the local government. By the end of 2014, construction was started when the developer garnered a fortune from deposit payments by interested buyers. Lured by fast-rising prices, the developer rescinded the initial terms of sale in late 2015 and offered two alternatives to the pre-sale contractors: opt to get a full refund of their initial deposit or switch to a sales term subject to the much higher current market price. The goal of the participants is, therefore, to petition the district government to pressure the developer to honor its original terms of sale.

The third group (Group C) involves residents of a new urban neighborhood fighting with contracted property management for routine service and maintenance. Normally, residential areas are in the care of property management companies based on a monthly fee through a service contract. But disputes may occur when contractual terms are breached, resulting in sloppy or diminished services to the neighborhood. At the time of our research in 2017 and 2018, members of this group had been engaged in a protracted contestation to seek resolutions by appealing to the property management company and the district government (which has oversight over administrative responsibilities).

The fourth group (Group D) features the largest number of dissenting individuals as well as the utmost level of challenge. Its goal is to stop the local government's effort to build a solid waste incinerator in its vicinity. This contention group is also the longest in duration among all four groups, having continued from 2010 through the whole process of our research. This group fits in with the overall trend of rising waves of environmental contestation in China in recent years, especially the mass movement in opposition to incinerators. This QQ group was one of many organizing and coordinating protest-related actions in the area.

3.3. Data Collection

We utilized a combination of methodological approaches and data sources in this research. Virtual ethnography

is a useful approach to disentangle immersive details and rich contexts of online interactions (Boellstorff et al., 2012). The ethnographic component of the research—which lasted from early 2014 to late 2018—consists of observing group discussions and interactions as a regular member in all four groups and occasionally participating in offline group events such as discussion sessions, rallies, and protests. As highlighted by Kozinets (2015), engagement and participation in social life are essential for researchers to feel the pulse of the frontlines of field research.

We collected a variety of data, including archival data of QQ group communications, notes of on-site protests and other activities, and, most importantly, interviews of QQ group members. The main data corpus that informs our analysis comes from semi-structured interviews of the 34 (20 female vs. 14 male) members of the QQ groups (see Table 1). Among the interviewees, 12 were QQ group administrators (core activists, four in Group A, two in Group B, and three each in Groups C and D), and 22 were general participants (periphery followers). Being an active member of these groups offered us the advantage in recruiting research participants, and we complied with the standard procedure of social research in obtaining informed consent from individuals for participating in the interviews. Considering the highly sensitive nature of the topics and activities these groups stand for, we took extra precautions to assure the anonymity of both the participants and the data. Individuals who agreed to participate were asked to choose to complete the interview via QQ text or audio chatting at a time most convenient to their schedule. Each participant was asked similar but not exactly identical questions, often with follow-up prompts where necessary. The interviews were completed from mid-2015 to late 2018. All text-based interviews were saved, and audio chats were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

We followed the three phases of analyzing the interviews: data reduction, data reorganization, and data representation (Roulston, 2014). The analytical procedure is guided by the synthesized strategies as recommended by Charmaz (2014, p. 115) in grounded theory coding of interview data as an effort to "understand participants' views and actions from their perspectives." Our initial coding (open coding) for the purpose of data reduction was conducted with a subsection of the interview data to extract meanings and interpretations into major emerging categories. In our data reorganization phase (focused coding), we applied and modified the previous coding scheme by traversing through the complete data corpus. Once the data coding was concluded, we followed the logic and logistics of axial coding in integrating the data in order "to find coherence to the emerging analysis" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 147). While coding data into categories, we also made an effort to "read

holistically and holonically for a hermeneutic interpretation” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 215) of the synthesized narratives from each interviewee.

In ascertaining dominant and recurring themes and clusters of meaning, we were primarily inspired by the conceptual and procedural approach as mapped out by Braun and Clarke (2021). We extracted thematic threads and integrated them into coherent narrative lines in relation to our core research questions.

4. Findings

4.1. Gatekeeping, Identity Building, and Monitoring

Throughout the process of observation, participation, and interaction with group members, we noted salient niceties in the management of memberships and the day-to-day operation of group activities in the context of their missions and stated goals. Norms, expectations, and routine patterns of interactions among members point to the unique collective identity and psyche of each group. This all starts with the initiation of group memberships. Across all four groups, a common thread we noted is that group administrators are very circumspect in admitting new members and monitoring any potential flags that may disrupt or derail the predefined mission of group activities. Group administrators and core members worked diligently to reach out to a large base of individuals who were likely participants of collective action. Groups were advertised publicly through posters in prominent venues, and interpersonal networks were mobilized for recruiting. Activists in Groups A, B, and C even adopted a carpet recruiting strategy by going door-to-door to persuade individuals to join. However, not everyone who submitted a request was admitted to the QQ groups, as a high level of caution was exercised in admitting members. Each request was given a careful background check in terms of relevance, motivation to engage, and clear interest in participating. Because each group was formed with a set goal of contention, admission to a group was preconditioned on proof of identity and residence so that these individuals could be veritable targets of collective action.

Each QQ group is managed by about a dozen of administrators, who play the role of gatekeepers and moderators in overseeing its day-to-day flow of communication. In order to maintain cohesion, groups enforce a strict policy of restricting the scope of communication to topics highly related to the issues of contention. We tracked the streams of messages for a few selective months in each group from 2015 to 2018 and found that 80% to 85% of the threads were closely focused on the chosen issues at hand. From time to time, a small number of individuals may send out commercial spam or messages totally unrelated to designated group activities, to which group administrators and other members will issue warnings. Repeated offenders risk having their membership terminated. At the same time, messages

deemed to have the potential to demoralize or derail group activities are typically deflated or debunked by fellow members. Indeed, over the duration of our research, we observed a number of individuals being kicked out of these QQ groups for distributing commercial messages, being uninterested in group actions, having anti-group interests, or being suspected of spying.

In the process of gaining membership and recruiting interviewees in the QQ groups, we noticed an unmistakable pattern of an increasing level of excruciating scrutiny commensurate with the degree of difficulty and sensitivity corresponding to the type of contentious action each group hinges upon. Entry to Group A met with the lowest hurdle, while membership in Groups B and C had to be obtained through recommendation and assurance of other group members to group administrators. Joining Group D was the most tortuous, facilitated by the researcher’s active participation in offline protest activities on numerous occasions.

Participants from Group A were the most receptive to interview solicitations, while those in Group D were the most uncooperative. As a matter of fact, the researcher who conducted the bulk of the interviews was discontinued from Groups B and D by group administrators upon receiving complaints from members who were being contacted for possible interviews. Confirmation of no evil intention and verification of credentials on the part of the researcher by multiple good-standing members in the respective groups helped the researcher to reenter these groups. Similarly, the researcher’s participation in numerous on-site protests facilitated the interview process, as a number of interviewees requested proof of presence in field protests prior to agreeing to be interviewed.

4.2. The Power of Soft Information

Like most other communal practices, QQ groups cultivate a collective sense of “shared awareness,” which is defined by Shirky (2008, pp. 35–36) as “the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too.” This shared awareness starts with, but extends beyond, simply informational sharing. The majority of the interviewees confirmed the usefulness of and their dependence on these QQ groups for obtaining information in relation to the group-specific points of focus. The sentiment is best echoed by an interviewee from Group D, who was amazed to learn from the group that “other people feel the same way as I do” against building the waste incinerator in the vicinity.

Although it is often possible for members to obtain similar information from other sources, the content resonates better with the individuals when it comes (even if it may be a repost from elsewhere) from one of their own. Additionally, there is also a sizable chunk of information that is only available from the group, such as insiders’ backdoor updates (many members have friends

or acquaintances in local government branches who often share first-hand information from within the government) and what has worked and what has not in similar campaigns in other places. Reposted information is often annotated and made relevant to the situation at hand, adding a personal touch and customized appeal. Some information is actionable, as illustrated by the circulation of tips in Group D on which specific government officials (with decision power) to appeal to, and the sharing of personnel profiles in Groups B and C with explanations on whom to target in making complaints.

4.3. Group Psyche, Emotional Contagion, and the Egalitarian Spirit

QQ groups provide a viable venue for collective support under varied circumstances. In specific relevance to contentious action, group affiliation conduces to the development and maintenance of close emotional relationships. We found two persistent thematic lines among the interviewees: When things go well, QQ groups become a platform for members to send out self-congratulatory, uplifting, and sometimes electrifying rally calls in moving forward; at times of hiccups and setbacks, quite a few members indicate that QQ groups help them “just let it out,” stay upbeat, and work out ways to fight on. A Chinese idiom that has been mentioned multiple times is that, under circumstances of hardship, being in the same group strengthens the sense of camaraderie and allows members to “huddle together for warmth” (抱团取暖). This is aptly summarized by one member in Group D, who was surprised that “many people [in the group] share my anger and frustration over the incinerator plan. Chatting with them gives me the emotional release with like-minded individuals.” On the positive end, a participant from Group C said that battling together “builds a connection that runs deeper than just among neighbors. It gratifies me that I have these people living next door.”

Interaction within groups and participation in collective activities also have the spillover effects of strengthening interpersonal relatedness and group cohesion. As people get to know one another on a more intimate level, the relationships among many may naturally evolve from weak ties to close connections. Quite a few interviewees mentioned that they developed long-term relations and congenial friendships with QQ group members through weekend excursions, family trips, and other socializing events that are not directly related to contentious missions. As one informant in Group B remarked: “As someone who recently relocated, the QQ group gives me a great opportunity to be friends with like-minded people in the neighborhood.”

The culture of QQ groups thrives on an egalitarian spirit that encourages peer-to-peer, open, and democratic participation. Interviewees expressed very few concerns or qualms about contributing to the discussions if they so choose. The fact that QQ allows users

to anonymize their identity eases individual participation because they do not have to worry how friends or colleagues may judge them based on brazen expressions of opinions or suggestions. As it pans out, participation in collective action, especially when it involves contention with powerful corporate or state interests, works best on the principle of voluntariness rather than coercion. There is also a noticeable spillover or contagious effect across the groups in terms of the spirit of activism because multiple individuals, who did not seem to be heavily involved in most other aspects of group activities, said that the dedication and passion they sensed from fellow activists precipitated their participation.

However, this egalitarian spirit hinges on the presumption that there is a willingness to act, which is the primary goal of each group. Individuals are allowed to debate what they think are the best tactics of action, but any speeches that may disrupt the group goal of taking action meet with decisive resistance from most members. Dissenters are often spiraled into silence by the will of the majority, a trend that is well noted by this activist in Group D: “Whenever there is voice questioning the need to take action, or the tendency to sink group morale, it will mostly meet with denunciation by the majority. After a few occurrences, dissenting voice is completely silenced in group conversations.”

4.4. Action-Centered and Activist-Brokered Networks

The ultimate benchmark of success for each QQ group is to mobilize members into collective action in order to achieve their respective goals. A common thread we have noted is that there are meticulously coordinated activities in planning for events and mobilizing participation. Because residents moving to these newly established residential districts hail from diverse backgrounds and origins, this poses a major barrier to organizing and mobilizing for action. This leads multiple interviewees to conclude that “none of the protests would have been possible without this QQ group.” One interviewee from Group B said that “the QQ group has been extremely helpful [in reaching our goals]. Without it, I would have lost my apartment [under contract].”

Events and activities all four groups organize include written and online appeals, petitions to the local office of the Bureau for Letters and Calls (the official body in charge of public complaints), attending public hearings, engaging online and conventional media platforms, writing letters to local representatives and government officials, and collective strolling (as a special form of protest). Groups B, C, and D are also successful in staging protests in public venues, something that Group A planned to do but suspended when the major goal of the campaign succeeded prior to the need for public confrontation. Groups B and C also organized appeals and complaints to the government inspection squad from the higher authority. In particular, Group D also succeeded in organizing a few highly publicized road blockages in

protest of the local government's effort to construct a waste incinerator in the vicinity. As is the typical strategy with public protest, the whole event was videotaped via smartphones by designated members, and photos were posted via multiple platforms of social media in real time. Local media were also notified ahead of the protest.

QQ groups are used as a viable venue for contemplating and debating the details of tactics. Individual members would draft petition letters, share them with the group, offer advice on what to say at public hearings, what legal recourse they had (in the case of Groups B and C), how to contact local government agencies in sending their feedback, where to go online, and what to say to magnify their voice. Meticulous details were worked out and shared with the group as to how to act at each step.

Resource mobilization has been an important (and oftentimes make-or-break) factor in shaping collective action. Besides human and information resources, QQ groups also function as an effective platform for fund-raising in support of group contentious activities. All these groups except Group A engage vigorously in soliciting and organizing donations from both in-group and out-group sources. There is a transparent process for sharing information about money flows and expenditures, which helps in subsequent gifting. Of special note is Group D, which raised over one million Chinese yuan (approximately 158 K US dollars) from 2014 to 2017 to support event planning of public protest.

Although there is no institutional organization involved, tactical organization by a core group of activists is essential in making group action possible through painstaking preplanning. Core activists function as leaders and largely stay invisible to the larger group, in effecting a core-periphery (leader-follower) organizational structure to stage large-scale group protests and contentious activities. The core set of activists played a pivotal role in initiating each QQ group through aggressive recruiting, and they take care of the day-to-day administration of the QQ group in spearheading discussion and streamlining participation. Core activists set up dedicated channels (typically on WeChat and QQ) among themselves and often spend time together in person to contemplate, debate, and strategize. They are also essential in chartering every detail such as duration, route, and slogans to guide group members in staging public protests. Yet, they carefully choreograph online and offline activities by staying behind the scenes and avoiding publicity, mostly to avoid becoming potential targets of retribution and prosecution, as the possibility of an official crackdown cannot be dismissed.

4.5. *The Cat-and-Mouse Game*

Initially, all QQ groups functioned as platforms for distributing scheduled collective action events beforehand so as to maximize participation. It was quickly found out that information about planned protests was often leaked to the real estate developer (Group B), the

property management (Group C), and the local police (Groups C and D) ahead of time, and carefully premeditated contentious action was thus foiled on a few occasions. Therefore, group members came to the discovery that spies for the realty developer (Group B) and property management (Group C) infiltrated the QQ groups, and either a government informant(s) was present or group discussions became a target of surveillance by the local police for Group D. In response, the groups changed their organizing tactics, and limited online discussions in the group to the announcement of forthcoming protest events without releasing the exact venue or date. Instead, a core set of leaders would work out the tactical details among themselves through their separate channels and then communicate these to individual activists who would subsequently resort to interpersonal networks (offline, via smartphones, or alternative channels of communication) to mobilize members for participation merely hours ahead of the planned protest on the same day. Multiple interviewees who played leading roles revealed to us that they relied on alternative channels (via separate QQ groups or WeChat groups) to discuss logistics and sensitive topics and worked out sophisticated plans on what to communicate to the larger group. This multi-tiered strategy seems to have worked smoothly for subsequent protest activities, as confirmed by our interviewees. QQ group space became an effective venue to circulate protest-related post hoc announcements in order to pep up group morale.

By contrast, Group A did not experience any disruptive intervention from its primary target of appeal (i.e., district government), most likely due to the much less sensitive nature of their demands, and members rarely resorted to public protests in addressing their grievances. Building a good school district is not substantively out of tune with the overall goal of the local authorities, even though disagreements often exist on how that may be accomplished.

4.6. *Boundary-Setting*

Most members in these groups are unequivocally cautious in defining the boundaries of their intended contention and stay away from proscribed territories (e.g., incendiary speech and anti-government rhetoric). Group administrators actively delete member-contributed posts that fall within the taboo category, and discussions that are deemed out of the line are immediately terminated. All groups cite excessively government documents and policies in support of their causes. Members in Group C even went to the length of quoting from President Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress as proof that what they were requesting is within the parameters of Xi's nation-building grand goal. In a couple of protests, slogans that did not match the collective cause or were out of line were confiscated by other members. This strategy of self-limiting protests and contention to their narrowly

tailored goals was mentioned repeatedly by interviewees as an effective way to fend off government retaliation.

4.7. Barriers and Inhibitors

We asked the interviewees what they perceived as the barriers and drawbacks in organizing contentious action via QQ groups. The issue receiving the most complaints is one that has persistently challenged organizers of collective action—the presence of free riders across all groups (Tilly, 1978). Interestingly, the presence of free riders correlates to the level of difficulty in the goals of the groups' contention. Participation in group discussion and contentious action is the most widespread in Group A and is the most uneven in Group D. In other words, the largest number of free riders exists in Group D, as corroborated by both our observation and the interviewee testimonials. One frustration that most activists in Group D shared with us is the number of “bystanders” in the group.

Because QQ users can easily register using pseudonyms, that poses challenges to organizers of collective action on two fronts: first, it is hard to verify member identities at the time of admittance to a group; second, the veil of virtual identity makes it easier for certain members to stay inactive and refrain from participating. This harks back to the previously mentioned suspicion by multiple interviewees that the groups have been infiltrated by business and government informants. Another issue that upsets many interviewees is the perceived ubiquity of state surveillance over what happens in group discussions, and that serves as a potential deterrent for some individuals to fully engage in online chatting. Lastly, it was mentioned earlier that positive spillover may occur when members go upbeat and exhibit optimism. The reverse can be true as well, as some interviewees point out: contagion is a double-edged sword because, during times of setbacks or non-progress, pessimistic feelings from some members could dissipate quickly to others in the group, thus demobilizing individual incentives for participating in later events.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Breakneck economic development in the reform era in the past four decades has disentangled social, economic, and political relations in China and has turned the country into a hotbed of collective action. Staging public protests has become an effective way for disassociated individuals and organized groups across social sectors and geographic regions to lodge complaints and gain leverage when negotiating with state agents and powerful interest groups.

The surge of contentious activities has paralleled the explosive growth of social media use within China. As shown in the findings of our research with QQ groups, the popularization of social media tools and platforms has reenergized and redefined the landscape of contentious action.

The four QQ groups we studied here all originated from interest-based connections hailing from the same geographic areas and established their online presence as a platform for contemplating and mobilizing contentious activities. Three groups (Groups A, B, and C) pertain to the rising waves of “rightful protest” (grievances derived from claimants' unfulfilled rights; O'Brien, 2013), and one group (Group D) falls in the popular domain of environmental activism (Tai, 2018). The interconnection between these QQ groups activates and revitalizes latent communal ties related to the common pursuit of contentious goals. Interaction in these goal-oriented QQ groups has introduced new dynamics and vitality to everyday resistance and popular contention. As a special technology-enabled social space, these QQ groups all thrive on the practice of sharing—not merely informational sharing, but rather a collective sense of “shared awareness” (Shirky, 2008) that induces a regularized “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1990) among members.

What permeates the QQ zone extends beyond hard information; rather, it delivers a type of “soft information” with customized touches and tailored angles that resonate well with targeted individuals. Although many of the messages circulated in the groups may also be found elsewhere, they come with annotated interpretations made relevant to the very specific undertaking of these groups. There is also information that is only available to these respective groups, mostly backchannel updates and action-oriented tactical messages. All these messages carry special appeals among group members, because fellow members who distribute the messages necessarily have endorsed them.

Herding, which is “the alignment of thoughts or behaviours of individuals in a group (herd) through local interactions rather than centralized coordination” (Raafat et al., 2009, p. 420), has been a well-documented feature of human behavior under various circumstances. We have noted evidence pointing to varying degrees of the “ripple effect” (Barsade, 2002) in which the urge to act transfers among members of the QQ groups. Being exposed to contentious speech may cultivate a particular mentality, a lifestyle, or an attitude that spurs individuals to act in protests, as echoed in the concept of “speech cascade,” which contends that “public understanding of what constitutes impermissible speech may change abruptly, sparking bandwagons of uncensored speech” (Druzin & Li, 2016, p. 369). Likewise, spontaneous eruption of mass protests may also collapse regime control from time to time, as amply evidenced in waves of mass incidents across regions in China in recent years. As our findings demonstrate, the virtual space of QQ groups provides a vital venue for individuals to sustain contemplation, coordination, and engagement in collective action.

The primary motivation for individuals to join in contentious action is interest-driven. However, the process of participating in group discussions typically leads to awakened rights consciousness and policy awareness among individuals, whereas contentious action breeds

“protest opportunism” (Chen, 2012) that exerts responsiveness to collective grievances from government and corporate authorities. Even though the protests we examined fit loosely with the “organizing without organization” prototype (Shirky, 2008), this by no means downplays the pivotal need for preemptive, painstaking down-to-earth organizing. Voluntary leadership by core activists plays an indispensable role in initiating and coordinating member participation and bringing collective action to fruition. In their important article on connective action, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) pinpoint three ideal types of organizational networks: self-organizing networks, organizationally enabled networks, and organizationally brokered networks. Our findings, however, identified a fourth type—activist-brokered networks in which core leadership from self-organizing individuals enacts periphery involvement and participation in contentious actions. Even though these leading individuals lack formal organizational affiliation, their brokerage is essential to connect disparate individuals and build strong coordination of collective action. This hybrid model of connective action crosscuts Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012, p. 756) self-organizing networks and organizationally brokered networks and points to a viable roadmap toward mobilizing participation in collective contention in the era of personalized social networks, especially under the conditions of a relatively closed (controlled) communication environment. The threat of a repressive regime may be a deterrent for easily identifiable leaders of contentious politics, and this type of network structure mitigates potential risk of retribution by government authorities towards individual activists. Likewise, member-only communication in QQ groups creates a buffer against government censors and activates the contentious spirit of participants at the periphery.

QQ Zone provides a robust venue for collective discussion, deliberation, and mobilization. But social media can act as a double-edged sword, as shown by the pervasive presence of surveillance and infiltration by the government and powerful commercial entities in these QQ groups. Group leaders, who mostly hide their identities behind the virtual veil, have adopted a multi-layered mechanism of group mobilization: utilizing more secure platforms for strategizing protest among core activists, resorting to QQ groups for spreading the spirit of contention and pro-action, and relying on conventional interpersonal networks in mobilizing participation. Moreover, self-limiting the scope of collective protest through framing group demands seems to be an important consensual understanding in sustaining contentious causes.

Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of this research in that data were only gathered from four QQ groups. Findings cannot, therefore, be interpreted as representing the evolving terrains and diverse scope of popular contention in China. One important omission in our research is the domain of political protest and ideologically charged movements. Even though we noted

the multi-tiered nature of communication among participating individuals, our research was confined to four specifically situated QQ groups, and we were not able to cover the complete networks of communication activists used in our data collection and analysis. Future research should expand to the investigation of multi-platform integration in the mobilization of contentious action.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Zixue Tai (PhD, University of Minnesota) is an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Kentucky, where he is sequence head of the Media Arts and Studies program. His research interests primarily focus on the interplay of new media technology, users, and society in China, with a particular emphasis on social media and digital games.