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Spontaneous action coalescence: rethinking collective contention under high surveillance

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ABSTRACT

This article develops the concept of spontaneous action coalescence (SAC) to explain protest participation under conditions of high surveillance. Drawing on 26 in-depth interviews that combine media-published and researcher-conducted accounts, we explore how individuals engage in contention without prior coordination, organizational ties, or shared strategic intent. We argue that SAC captures a distinct logic of action where independent, atomized behaviors converge through visibility, imitation, and emotional resonance rather than through networks or leadership. Tracing SAC as a process – from moral and emotional triggers to situational convergence, risk-mitigating atomization, and post-protest trajectories – we demonstrate how heterogeneous and improvised actions generated collective effects. By distinguishing SAC from conventional collective action and decentralized movements, this study advances the theorization of contention in authoritarian, high-surveillance contexts.

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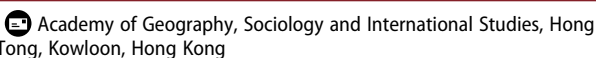
KEYWORDS

Spontaneous action coalescence (SAC); collective contention; digital surveillance; atomization; authoritarianism

Introduction

The Lone Brave Individual (孤勇者) – the Chinese rendition of *Arcane: League of Legends* theme song – unexpectedly became a vivid expression of dissent in China in 2022. The song, initially promoted by state media to praise medical personnel, was later reappropriated by a population exhausted by prolonged COVID controls. When a lone protester hung banners on Beijing's Sitong Bridge calling for 'food, not PCR tests' and 'votes, not a leader,' netizens dubbed him 'The Lone Brave Individual,' borrowing the song's title. This moment ignited a growing undercurrent of defiance that would soon culminate in the White Paper Protests (WPP).

Whereas localized protests in China have traditionally targeted specific material grievances, such as labor disputes or environmental harms (Lee, 2008), the WPP, though initially triggered by opposition to the zero-COVID policy, articulated broader demands for civil liberties. Even more strikingly, these protests, which began symbolically at Nanjing Communication University, where a student held up a blank sheet of paper –

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a silent metaphor for the absence of free expression – rapidly spread across multiple cities nationwide, despite the absence of formal organizations or coordinated leadership. This presents a fundamental puzzle: In an era of pervasive digital surveillance and proactive state repression, how did such widespread mobilization occur?

We argue that the WPP exemplifies a distinct form of contention that we term spontaneous action coalescence (SAC). Unlike traditional movements with hierarchical organizations or newer movements characterized by loose networks and fluid structures, SAC is marked by atomization as a survival strategy. Drawing on interviews with WPP participants, we find that mobilization was not driven by concrete organizational networks but by a widely shared sense of ‘emotional liberation’ (Goodwin et al., 2000) and by spontaneous improvisation and imitation of symbolic behavioral art, triggered and amplified through digital witnessing. Participants, acutely aware of pervasive surveillance, independently decided to engage in acts of defiance. Digital platforms did not coordinate strategies; instead, they transmitted powerful emotions and circulated templates for symbolic action. As a result, individuals’ simultaneous, spontaneous symbolic acts – such as offering flowers to the deceased or holding up blank sheets of paper – coalesced into a visible collective presence. This study shows how constraints on personal freedom can paradoxically generate new forms of collective expression, offering fresh insight into the dynamics of diffused resistance under authoritarian rule.

Beyond organization: collective contention under high surveillance

Collective action has traditionally been understood as a process through which individuals overcome isolation by uniting around shared goals and solidarities, often through formal organizations (McAdam, 1999; Tarrow, 2022). This shared engagement generates collective efficacy, enabling groups to accomplish what individuals alone cannot (Gamson, 1975; Kornhauser, 1959). Yet in an era of increasingly ‘individualized responses to collective problems’ (Husted et al., 2023, p. 368), new forms of contention challenge this paradigm.

The rise of new social movements (NSMs) in post-industrial societies shifted collective action toward more fluid, decentralized, and non-hierarchical forms centered on identity, autonomy, and postmaterialist concerns (Pichardo, 1997; Wieviorka, 2005). Digital communication further expanded networked modes of mobilization (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Van de Donk et al., 2004), producing what Wiktorowicz (2004, p. 12) describes as ‘decentralized, polycephalous, and reticulated’ movement structures. These forms, however, presuppose civil society networks and relative freedom of expression – conditions largely absent in authoritarian contexts.

In authoritarian contexts, repression and surveillance so tightly constrain participation and social connection, turning atomization into a structural reality rather than a chosen tactic or expression of free will. As Husted et al. (2023, p. 368) note, atomization entails communicative similarity without collective capacity: individuals may share grievances yet remain structurally disconnected and unable to coordinate. Where regimes dismantle or co-opt civil society, contentious action is shaped less by preference than by risk.

China offers a paradigmatic case of contention under such conditions. Over time, resistance has shifted from mobilizing extant networks, as in the 1989 Democracy Movement (Zuo & Benford, 1995), to increasingly fragmented and individualized forms, including cellular activism (Lee, 2007), vent anger incidents (Yu, 2008), temporary protest communities (Cai, 2010), and ‘mobilizing without the masses’ (Fu, 2017, 2018). As the party state’s digital repression has become increasingly proactive (Margaret, 2018; Morris, 2022), overt coordination via social media has been rapidly preempted, exemplified by the failure of the 2011 ‘Jasmine Revolution.’ Against this backdrop, the WPP exhibits a distinctive mode of contention: many participants neither relied on hidden networks nor concealed coordination; instead, they acted independently and without prior agreement in response to shared grievances.

Spontaneous action coalescence: emergence without coordination

To understand the distinctive pattern of contention in the WPP, we introduce the concept of spontaneous action coalescence (SAC) – a process in which atomized, independently initiated actions converge into a recognizable collective presence through imitation, visibility, and emotional resonance rather than through coordination or organization. In contrast to collective or connective action, SAC does not rely on shared planning, networks, or durable ties; instead, it generates the appearance and limited effects of collective contention without intentional coordination. In this sense, SAC blurs the boundary between individual acts of everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) and organized protest, while diverging from models of disguised organization or cellular networks commonly observed under authoritarianism.

SAC unfolds as individuals act alone. Participants neither communicate nor anticipate joint participation. Mobilization is driven less by organizational appeals than by emotionally charged symbolic acts – images, livestreams, and performances circulating online – that invite imitation rather than coordination. At this stage, imitation produces similarity but not collectivity: actions remain parallel, dispersed, and unconnected.

Coalescence occurs when these imitative acts overlap in shared temporal and spatial settings, particularly in symbolically meaningful public spaces. Mutual visibility allows participants to recognize their actions as part of a broader pattern, generating emotional amplification and a fleeting sense of shared presence akin to collective effervescence, even in the absence of leadership or infrastructure. SAC thus produces a collective appearance situationally, not through mobilization into a movement.

Two mechanisms shape SAC (Figure 1). At the macro level, digital technologies function simultaneously as channels of visibility and instruments of surveillance, rendering coordination risky and easily suppressed. At the micro level, individuals respond to this environment by adopting improvisational, risk-averse strategies. Unlike connective action, where digital networks enable coordination, deliberation, and sustained engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Cheng & Yuen, 2025; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013), digital platforms in SAC primarily serve as arenas for observation and emotional transmission. In high-surveillance contexts marked by ‘connective repression’ (Earl et al., 2022), emotions such as moral outrage, humiliation, or grief replace organizational directives as drivers of action (Pearlman, 2013; Schulte, 2021). Social media amplifies these

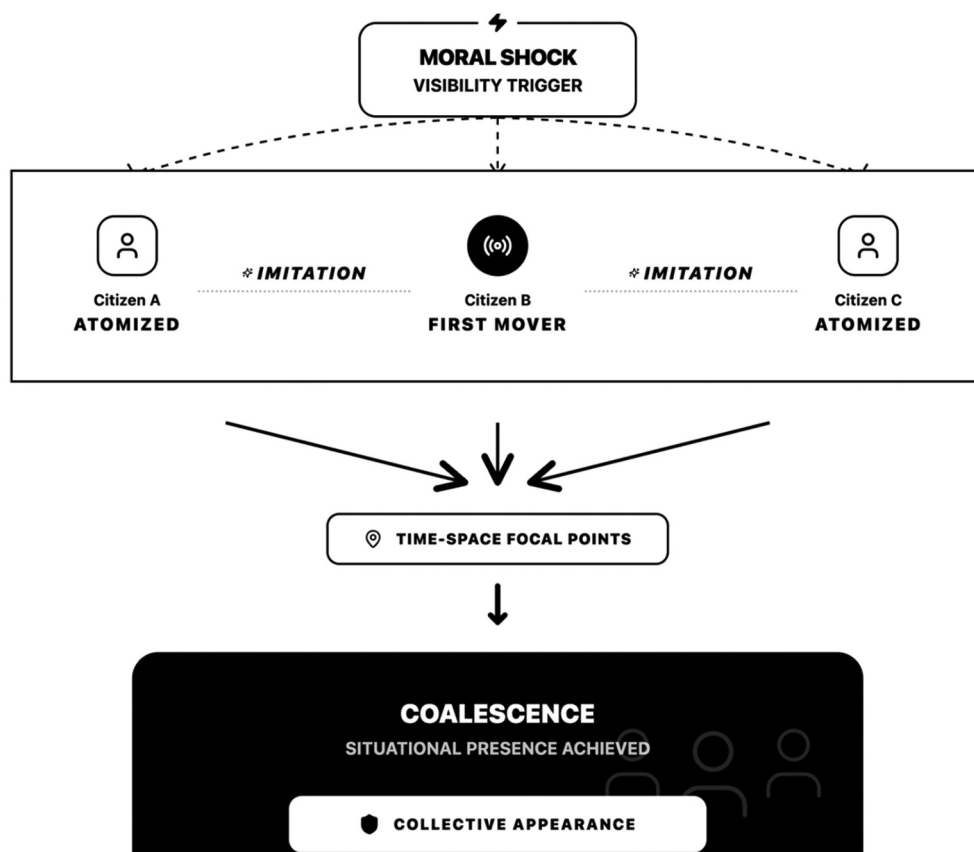


Figure 1. The mechanism of spontaneous action coalescence (SAC).

emotions, generating moral shocks (Jasper, 2008) and passive networks that highlight commonality (Bayat, 2013) without producing durable ties.

By rendering isolated acts publicly salient, livestreams and viral images create ‘focal points’ (Schelling, 1980) that elicit imitation at particular times and locations without prior communication. When multiple individuals independently respond to the same focal point, their actions converge into a visible collective moment. In the WPP, such focal points often emerged unexpectedly from singular acts – holding a blank sheet of paper or laying flowers at a site of mourning – making it difficult for both participants and the state to anticipate them. Unlike the predictable ‘dissident calendar’ (Truex, 2019) where well-known focal dates or venues produce convenient targets for repression or preemption, SAC is characterized by radical contingency: coalescence is accidental, situational, and ephemeral.

SAC differs fundamentally from both traditional collective action and decentralized social movements (Figure 2). Collective action presupposes coordination, shared intent, and some expectation of joint effort, typically sustained through organizations, networks, or repertoires. Decentralized movements relax hierarchies but still rely on connective structures – multiple nodes linked through digital platforms, shared frames, and tactical

	Collective Action	Decentralized / Connective Movements	Spontaneous Action Coalescence (SAC)
Basic Logic	Planned mobilization; intentional joint action	Digitally enabled signaling and diffusion through networked coordination	Atomized individual actions; emergent convergence without coordination
Organizational Structure	Organizations (formal or informal) and leadership	Fluid networks with multiple interconnected nodes	No nodes; deliberate disconnection
Coordination	Explicit, hierarchical	Horizontal, connective	Absent
Role of Digital Media	Tool for mobilization and organization	Platform for coordination, deliberation, and tactical adaptation	Channel of visibility and affective exchange, yet simultaneously apparatuses of surveillance
Primary Driver	Shared goals and strategy	Shared frames and networked communication	Emotional resonance and imitation
Risk Management	Shared risk and mutual reliance	Distributed and connective support	Improvisational self-protection and disconnection
Temporal Pattern	Sustained mobilization; relatively stable	Adaptive and iterative; moderately durable	Situational, episodic, ephemeral; fragile and unpredictable
Collective Identity	Formed prior to or during mobilization	Cultivated through interaction	Emerges briefly after action begins
Typical Context	Low–moderate repression	Moderate repression with digital space	High surveillance and connective repression

Figure 2. Comparison of modes of Contention.

signaling – as seen in Occupy or Hong Kong’s ‘Be Water’ movement (Cheng & Yuen, 2025; Ho, 2025). Decentralization implies many nodes; SAC implies none.

SAC involves convergence without connection. Individuals remain deliberately disconnected, choosing actions and risk-mitigation strategies independently and without expecting mutual support. What binds them is not organization or identity but visible imitation and emotional resonance. Collectivity is not a premise of action but an emergent outcome. The result is a momentary collective presence that can appear powerful yet remains fragile, unsustainable, and unpredictable.

Data and methods

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on *narrative analysis*, selected to explain how individuals in high-risk authoritarian settings shift from passive observers to active participants in acts of defiance. While quantitative approaches capture protest scale, they often miss the psychological and interpretive mechanisms that drive participation. Narrative analysis is particularly well-suited to this task for three reasons.

First, it treats accounts as structured stories rather than fact inventories (Riessman, 2008), allowing analysis of how participants interpret signals, justify risk, and experience the ‘cognitive switch’ from fear to action. Second, it preserves temporality. Because SAC unfolds through a sequence – signal reception, threshold crossing, and action – narrative analysis enables process tracing that demonstrates spontaneity and rules out pre-planned coordination (George & Bennett, 2005). Third, it enhances validity in high-risk contexts where large-scale surveys are infeasible. Here, narrative analysis identifies causal mechanisms that quantitative approaches may miss, grounding validity in analytic depth rather than statistical breadth (Small, 2009).

Our dataset combines media-published and researcher-conducted interviews (Figure 3). It includes 19 semi-structured interviews with WPP participants conducted and published by five reputable media outlets between 29 November 2022, and 14 June 2023: *Bumingbai Podcast* ($n = 6$), *NGOCN* ($n = 3$), *Initium* ($n = 8$), *Radio Free Asia* ($n = 1$), and *Radio France Internationale* ($n = 1$). Although numerous media reports covered the WPP, only a limited

Outlet Description & Credibility	Interviewee	Region
不明白博客 https://www.bumingbai.net/2022/11/ep-027-china-protestors-text/ A prominent Mandarin-language podcast hosted by journalist Yuan Li (New York Times). It specializes in long-form interviews with Chinese citizens on current events, providing a rare platform for uncensored personal narratives regarding Chinese politics and society.	Bruce	Shanghai
	Miranda	Shanghai
	Echo	Shanghai
	Serena	Shanghai
	Tong	Nanjing
	Zhang	Shanghai
NOGCN https://matters.news/@ngocncat/353367-%E5%AF%B9%E8%AF%9D%E4%B8%89%E4%BD%8D%E5%B9%BF%E5%B7%9E%E7%99%BD%E7%BA%B8%E6%8A%97%E8%AE%AE%E8%80%85-%E5%BD%93%E4%BD%A0%E5%BC%80%E5%A7%8B%E5%AF%B9%E6%81%90%E6%83%A7%E5%85%8D%E7%96%AB-%E8%BF%99%E5%B0%B1%E6%98%AF%E8%83%9C%E5%88%A9-bafybeigmbwj6rnos67zhpvr4tegwzzjpb6tdcmkxhk3fcn5n67iap5ip44 An independent media platform focusing on civil society, social movements, and human rights in China. Despite facing severe censorship, it maintains a reputation for documenting grassroots activism and marginalized voices.	Wanzi	Guangzhou
	Feiqing	Guangzhou
	Yixuan	Guangzhou
Initium Media eBook: China white paper protests 中國「白紙抗議」：走上街頭的反對聲音 A Singapore-based digital media outlet (originally Hong Kong-based) known for high-quality, in-depth investigative reporting on mainland China and the diaspora. It is widely regarded for its editorial independence and rigorous fact-checking standards.	Xingxing	Shanghai
	Lan	Shanghai
	Daxiong	Shanghai
	Nay	Shanghai
	Cuicui	Shanghai
	Suming	Beijing
	Xulei	Beijing
	Wangmeng	Beijing
Radio Free Aisa (RFA) https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/renquanfazhi/wy-11282022094229.html A nonprofit news service funded by the U.S. government that broadcasts news and information to Asian countries to help counter limited media freedom.	Chen	Shanghai
Radio France International (RFI) https://www.rfi.fr/tw/%E5%B0%88%E6%AC%84%E6%AA%A2%E7%B4%A2%E5%85%AC%E6%B0%91%E8%AB%96%E5%A3%87/20230614-%E7%99%BD%E7%B4%99%E9%81%8B%E5%8B%95%E5%8F%83%E8%88%87%E8%80%85%E6%96%BD%E5%A5%B3%E5%A3%AB-%E7%99%BD%E7%B4%99%E9%81%8B%E5%8B%95%E8%AE%93%E5%A4%A7%E5%AE%B6%E7%9C%8B%E5%88%B0%E4%BA%86%E4%BABA%E6%B0%91%E5%8F%AF%E4%BB%A5%E8%87%AA%E6%95%91%E7%9A%84%E5%B8%8C%E6%9C%9B The French public radio broadcaster's Chinese service. It provides international news coverage with a focus on human rights and political developments in China, operating independently of Chinese state censorship.	Shi	Beijing

Semi-structured interviews (October 2023)

Interviewee	Region	Gender
Hua	Shanghai	Male
Matthew	Chengdu	Male
Dee	Guangzhou	Male
Jiang	Beijing	Male
Gao	Shanghai	Male
Jun	Wuhan	Male
Mi	Shanghai	Female

Figure 3. Dataset overview: media-sourced interviews and semi-structured interview sample.

number of high-quality, in-depth interviews conducted by reputable outlets shortly after the protests provided contemporaneous accounts of participants' motivations, risk assessments, and self-protection strategies. We therefore included all such interviews available.

In addition, we conducted seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews in October 2023 with WPP participants who had subsequently left China. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and direct outreach via social media. We prioritized geographic diversity, but, given recruitment constraints, interviewed all willing participants rather than selecting among them. Of the seven interviewees, four were first-time

protesters, two had previously engaged in online rights-related activities, and one had prior offline civic engagement experience. The interviews were conducted over Zoom, lasted between one and two hours, and drew on participants from Shanghai ($n = 3$), Beijing ($n = 1$), Chengdu ($n = 1$), Guangzhou ($n = 1$), and Wuhan ($n = 1$). At the time of the interviews, all participants resided outside mainland China, which reduced personal security concerns when discussing politically sensitive experiences.

We acknowledge several limitations and potential selection biases in our combined dataset. First, both media-published and researcher-conducted interviews are subject to self-selection bias, likely overrepresenting articulate and politically engaged participants. Media outlets may further privilege narratively compelling accounts, potentially underrepresenting quieter or risk-averse forms of participation. All interviews also involve retrospective sense-making, which may impose coherence and moral clarity on initially uncertain experiences. Nonetheless, such potential biases do not fundamentally undermine our conceptualization of SAC, as the sample reflects diversity in background, personality, and prior civic experience. Moreover, if relatively confident and well-connected participants adopted spontaneous, atomized action, more timid or risk-averse individuals were likely at least as inclined to do so.

Second, the dataset underrepresents those who faced severe repression, disengaged out of fear, or refrained from participation altogether. Both media and researcher interviews capture participants who were not detained or silenced, and the researcher-interviewed participants had already exited high-risk environments. As a result, the data may skew toward less costly forms of participation and understate the deterrent effects of repression. The dataset also captures only participants, not nonparticipants, limiting inferences about participation thresholds and broader mobilization dynamics. We address these scope conditions and internal variation within the WPP in the analysis and Conclusion.

Third, media interviews are inevitably shaped by journalistic framing and question prompts tailored for public audiences and mindful of interviewees' safety; this context may influence how participants describe their motivations, coordination, and risks. Researcher-conducted interviews, though small in number due to the challenges of recruiting participants for a politically sensitive topic, allowed greater control over questioning and deeper probing. This complementary design enhances triangulation but introduces some asymmetry in analytic depth across cases.

Finally, with 26 interviews in total, the dataset is not statistically representative. Rather than estimating prevalence, the study aims to illuminate mechanisms and interpretive processes underlying spontaneous participation under high surveillance. Triangulating media-published and researcher-conducted interviews strengthens confidence in recurring patterns, while our findings remain explicitly process-oriented rather than proportional.

The research protocol for this study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (project no. REC/23–24/0046). Prior to participation, the researchers explained the study objectives and potential risks and obtained verbal informed consent from all interviewees. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, interview data were documented exclusively in researcher notes, omitting names and other identifying information. Access to the original data was restricted to the two researchers, and all materials will be securely destroyed upon completion of the study.

The analysis was conducted in three sequential stages. First, interview accounts were organized chronologically to reconstruct the sequence of events and actions described by each participant. Second, we examined these narratives to identify key turning points – specific moments when participants moved from observing events to taking action. Third, we compared cases across different locations to identify recurring mechanisms that shaped behavior. Data were analyzed and reported in aggregate form. When illustrative quotations were included, pseudonyms were used and all identifying details were removed.

We acknowledge the use of generative artificial intelligence tools in the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, GPT-5.2-Instant was used for language editing, Gemini-3-Flash was used to make the diagram, and LLM-enhanced search engines were employed to identify relevant literature. All outputs generated by these tools were carefully reviewed by the authors, and the accuracy and integrity of the content were verified.

Spontaneous action coalescence in the white paper protests

Having outlined SAC as a conceptual framework and detailed our methodology, we now examine its operation in the WPP. Research on high-risk activism typically emphasizes mobilizing structures and relational ties (McAdam, 2003; Nepstad & Smith, 1999), but these mechanisms do not adequately account for the dynamics of the WPP. Under conditions severely constraining coordination, participants acted without organizational support or interpersonal mobilization, making decisions independently in response to situational cues rather than to collective appeals. Perceptions of opportunity and repertoires of action thus emerged in an atomized and improvised manner, shaped by individual emotions and experiences. Collective visibility arose through the convergence of these independent acts rather than prior coordination. As the next subsection shows, digital communication functioned as an affective infrastructure, circulating moral shocks and symbolic templates that translated shared grievance into individual readiness for action and set in motion the imitation and coalescence that define SAC.

Emotional triggers and symbolic inspiration

During the WPP, digital communication functioned not merely as an information channel but as an affective infrastructure that translated emotion into action. Under repression, where formal mobilization was risky, digital platforms circulated moral shocks – emotionally charged narratives and images that disrupted everyday normalization and prompted political re-evaluation.

Under the zero-COVID policy, citizens widely shared accounts of hardship and tragedy online. The circulation of these narratives intensified anger, grief, and compassion – even among the ‘silent majority’ who rarely posted publicly. Interviewees noted that passive consumption alone – reading, watching, and privately forwarding content – fostered emotional engagement, describing a ‘collective awakening’ in which accumulated affect gradually lowered the psychological threshold for participation.

Censorship often amplified rather than dampened this dynamic. The rapid removal of sensitive content generated a ‘Streisand effect’ (Jansen & Martin, 2015), heightening attention and outrage. Official responses to tragedies like the Urumqi fire (AFP, 2022;

Koetse, 2022) were widely viewed as evasive, deepening public distrust. Users raced to repost videos and cultural artifacts in altered forms to evade censorship (Ni, 2022), reinforcing shared grievance.

As domestic platforms tightened controls, many turned to overseas social media beyond the Great Firewall. Interviewees reported following platforms such as X and accounts like ‘Teacher Li’ to track unfolding events. This transnational information flow exposed gaps between official narratives and lived experience, intensifying emotional dissonance and fostering what Burke (1969) calls ‘consubstantiality’ – a shared identity grounded in common suffering and moral grievance.

A series of crises amplified this emotional momentum. The Guizhou bus crash and the Urumqi fire functioned as cumulative moral shocks, with phrases such as ‘We are all on the bus’ (Yuan, 2022) condensing diffuse anxiety into shared shorthand. The Urumqi fire, in particular, marked a turning point, blending mourning with implicit protest.

Digital platforms not only circulated moral shocks but also enabled imitative action by making symbolic behaviors visible. Acts such as window chanting in Wuhan (BBC, 2022), balcony ‘pot-banging’ in Shanghai, and candlelight vigils spread through visibility and repetition rather than coordination. Despite swift repression (RFA, 2022), their simplicity and low cost made them easily replicable, lowering participation barriers.

Interviewees consistently stressed the motivational force of witnessing others’ actions, including Peng Zaizhou’s Sitong Bridge banner and the blank-paper protest in Nanjing. These acts served as moral exemplars and social proof, evoking encouragement, guilt, and resolve – emotions that pushed them from observation to participation.

Importantly, imitation was not blind replication but situated adaptation. Participants adjusted symbolic acts to local contexts – candles instead of banners, silence instead of slogans – illustrating pragmatic emulation under constraint. The persistence of Sitong Bridge slogans through private messaging, despite censorship, illustrates how imitation operated through fragmented yet interconnected digital pathways.

Several interviewees reported joining protests only after learning of arrests via social media at earlier defiance actions. This awareness intensified feelings of moral obligation and personal responsibility, transforming fear into resolve. In this way, digital platforms enabled a chain of emotional activation and visible imitation through which atomized, spontaneous acts coalesced into moments of collective visibility that carried the emotional force of collective contention, even in the absence of organization or coordination.

Digital visibility and situational coalescence

Despite stringent censorship, digital communication enabled dispersed individuals to *coalesce* by rendering others’ emotions and actions visible. Rather than coordinating behavior directly, platforms facilitated convergence by allowing individuals to observe emerging patterns of participation and sense a growing collective presence. As interviewees encountered online traces of symbolic actions in their own cities – such as livestreamed candlelight mourning on Wulumuqi Zhong Road in Shanghai or videos of gatherings at Hanzheng Street in Wuhan and designated sites in Chengdu and Guangzhou – they interpreted these locations as emerging ‘focal points’ and felt compelled to join. As Gao explained, ‘I wanted to be there, at least to bear witness.’ This

process produced the near-simultaneous accumulation of spontaneous actions, which took on a collective form without centralized organization or explicit coordination.

Emotional intensity was the immediate driver of this convergence, but timing was equally critical. Most participants identified the Urumqi fire as the moment when accumulated grievances crystallized into readiness for action. As Serena explained, ‘The image of the victims is more tangible ... empathy and sympathy were maximally stimulated.’ Matthew similarly recalled, ‘I wasn’t surprised ... I knew that defiance and resistance would soon come to my city.’ Digital media enabled individuals to mirror one another’s emotional states, generating a shared sense of urgency and, as Jasper (2018) describes, a ‘now-or-never’ sentiment. Importantly, this affective alignment preceded and enabled physical gathering, rather than resulting from it.

Analytically, the prominence of the Urumqi fire underscores the contingent nature of coalescence under repression. While earlier tragedies such as the Guizhou bus crash generated outrage, they did not trigger comparable convergence. The dynamics observed here suggest that collective expression emerges when diffuse grievances reach sufficient intensity and become anchored to visible acts of defiance. In such moments, any emotionally salient incident, particularly one involving vivid human suffering, can serve as a condensation point, transforming scattered emotions into parallel action and limiting the state’s capacity to anticipate or prevent gathering.

The coalescence of action did not depend on complete spontaneity or complete coordination. In Shanghai, visibility of others’ small-scale, unplanned actions directly encouraged further participation at Wulumuqi Zhong Road, producing an unexpected collective appearance. In Chengdu and Guangzhou, some interviewees noted the circulation of anonymous online posters naming specific gathering sites. Authorities quickly deleted these posters and preemptively deployed police, and participants perceived minimal coordination on the ground. What mattered most was not organizational clarity but the emotional experience of convergence – arriving at a symbolic site and realizing others had made the same decision independently. As Wanzi, who attended the Guangzhou gathering with two friends, recalled:

I thought the poster wouldn’t spread widely given the powerful online surveillance, so I wasn’t sure how many people would show up. But when I arrived at the site, I saw a crowd and assumed they were there for the same purpose as I was. I felt an indescribable sense of hope—I had no idea I could be part of such a massive action.

Moreover, upon arrival at rally sites, uncertainty was widespread. In the absence of formal leadership or scripts, participants drew on circulating digital repertoires to improvise. Hua recalled that when he reached Wulumuqi Zhong Road, chants began tentatively and without consensus. He responded by sharing, via AirDrop, the saved text of Peng Zaizhou’s Sitong Bridge slogans with those nearby, enabling a unified chant. This episode illustrates how digital artifacts functioned as coalescing devices, rapidly aligning individual actions into a shared performance.

The presence of multiple symbolic acts – chants, silence, candles, blank papers – also generated overlapping focal points that accommodated diverse risk thresholds while still enabling convergence. Although initial hesitation persisted, the affective contagion produced by witnessing others’ actions gradually overcame fear. Matthew described the

moment as an electrifying experience of collective empowerment, a sentiment echoed by Feiqing.

Participants' motivations varied. Some framed their participation as a reaction to lockdown policies rather than opposition to the political system. As Jun observed in Wuhan, 'most of the attendees . . . took to the streets as a reaction to the lockdown itself rather than opposing the political system.' Others were surprised or unsettled by the emergence of overt political slogans. These divergent interpretations highlight the internally heterogeneous nature of the protests and the absence of a unified political agenda, revealing a complex interplay between minimalist and maximalist demands. While external observers often framed the movement as either a narrow grievance against public health policy or a broad revolutionary challenge, interview data indicate the coexistence of both orientations, sometimes within the same crowd or even the same individual. Minimalist demands – ending Zero-COVID lockdowns, removing barricades, and restoring freedom of movement – provided a shared and urgent focal point for mobilization. Meanwhile, maximalist political slogans emerged spontaneously as individuals seized microphones or initiated chants, ranging from calls for transparency to explicit demands such as 'We want votes, not PCR tests.' In the absence of centralized leadership or message discipline, this heterogeneity reflected individual improvisation: minimalist demands generated critical mass, while maximalist expressions supplied symbolic and emotional intensity, transforming a policy-focused grievance into a moment of political contention.

Despite varying motivations, participants consistently emphasized the relational effects of coalescence. Even brief gatherings facilitated warm yet cautious connections among strangers – exchanging information, coordinating vigilance, and offering emotional support. As several interviewees described it, participants were 'gathering around a stove to keep ourselves warm' (圍爐取暖). At the same time, awareness of surveillance meant that these connections remained deliberately ephemeral, with little exchange of personal information.

Digital communication thus enabled the coalescence of atomized emotions, symbolic acts, and individual decisions by making others' actions visible and legible, allowing dispersed individuals to converge without prior coordination. As Gao summarized: 'It was so concrete and empowering, despite being brief, because we were physically there together, not just connected through online communication.'

Atomization as risk mitigation

Lacking organization or group deliberation, interviewees assessed relatively 'safe' ways of expressing emotion by imitating symbolic acts observed online, guided by their own rule consciousness. Participants widely believed that as long as their actions remained within what they perceived as state-tolerated boundaries, they would avoid serious consequences, though interpretations of these boundaries were highly subjective.

Acts of mourning – such as lighting candles or laying flowers for the victims of the Urumqi fire – were commonly viewed as compassionate rather than politically sensitive. For those accustomed to self-censorship, these acts were understood as

permissible expressions of limited freedom. As Bruce recalled when deciding to attend a vigil:

At 10 o'clock, I saw photos and livestreams of ongoing mourning events at the Wulumuqi Zhong Road posted by netizens on Weibo and thought, 'I'm going.' I didn't expect it to be dangerous or violent. So, I grabbed a pack of candles and some sticky notes and headed straight there.

Safety concerns centered on behavioral strategies. Interviewees emphasized moderation, low visibility, and avoiding leadership positions. Many adopted situational disguises – remaining at the periphery, blending into commercial spaces, or refraining from chanting – to minimize risk. Dee also described adopting protective tactics learned from online discussions of Hong Kong protests, including disabling mobile phones and concealing facial features. He attributed his release following police interrogation to the lack of evidence produced by these measures.

Despite individualized understandings of safety, interviewees converged on a shared strategy: isolation. Most avoided discussing participation beforehand and refrained from mobilizing others, citing awareness of censorship and surveillance. As Zhang explained, 'there is a tacit agreement among people not to say anything about collective action on any domestic social media platforms.' Dee similarly concluded that acting alone was preferable because organized action would be both swiftly suppressed and severely punished.

This logic was reflected in case variation. In Shanghai, online visibility of spontaneous, small-scale actions encouraged further participation, producing unexpected moments of collective presence. By contrast, in Chengdu and Guangzhou, pre-circulated mobilizing posters were swiftly removed, and police pre-emptively controlled protest sites, which may have deterred many individuals from participating even if they had considered doing so. Across locations, interviewees consistently observed that participants appeared primarily as individuals or in very small clusters, with no discernible organizational structure.

Most interviewees reported attending alone or with one trusted companion, often without prior discussion. Hua described his experience:

I went to Wulumuqi Zhong Road alone. Before going, I only discussed my plan with one best friend. He expressed his support but declined to accompany me. However, to my surprise, I encountered him and his girlfriend at the scene. He confessed that he couldn't resist the urge to come, so the three of us stayed together throughout the event.

Matthew recounted a similar dynamic in Chengdu:

No one on my social network discussed going to the rally in Chengdu. It was clear that people felt it was dangerous to even mention it. I went there with my roommate, just the two of us. ... When a young man attempted to join our conversation, my roommate and I became cautious, suspecting that he might be a 'spy', so we limited our conversation and distanced ourselves from him. However, upon reflection, I realized that we might have been overly cautious.

Several interviewees emphasized that this deliberate non-association protected them during subsequent police questioning. Gao, who attended the Wulumuqi Zhong Road

protest in Shanghai by deliberately going alone and avoiding discussion of his plans on social media or messaging platforms, explained:

During the interrogation, the police were mainly concerned with who had mobilized me and whether I had any connections with organizations, particularly overseas ones. They also asked whether I had contacted others to join me or was associated with people at the scene. As I said earlier, I did not call others or discuss my decision with anyone—I simply made up my mind and went alone. They examined all my communication records, but they couldn't find anything. I believe they concluded that I am not a protester.

Reflecting on the WPP, Mi contrasted it with Hong Kong's movements, noting the absence of mutual support in moments of danger and the pervasive fear that others might be informants.

In sum, participants in the WPP did not derive safety or resolve from interpersonal ties. Instead, they treated isolation as a form of self-protection in an environment where social connections could be readily exploited for repression. Yet paradoxically, it was precisely the visibility of isolated, imitative acts – circulating online and unfolding simultaneously in public space – that allowed these atomized actions to coalesce into fleeting but powerful moments of collective presence.

Effects and fragilities of SAC

As the government cracked down on the WPP and arrested some participants, interviewees had little knowledge of others' whereabouts, as they did not know anyone else involved or maintain contact with those they had encountered. Those who were arrested often coped with trauma in isolation. After his release, Hua did not leave home for a week and avoided speaking to anyone; instead, he fixated on online streams of protest-related information, often bursting into tears. Jiang reported a similarly painful experience of post-arrest trauma and depression endured alone. Dee himself felt less traumatized but noted that two colleagues who attended together experienced long-term fear and could discuss it only with each other.

Atomization also produced anxiety about being subjected to repression without anyone noticing. Some interviewees concealed their participation from their immediate circles but sought protection by contacting friends or even strangers living abroad. Jiang, for example, shared his personal information with an online acquaintance living overseas who he had never met, instructing him to publicize his story if he suddenly went missing.

Those who were not arrested did not fear being retroactively identified, as they had no organizational ties or accomplices. Nevertheless, they carefully kept their participation secret. Many interviewees reported never discussing their protest experience in the WPP with others before the interviews, despite strong emotional needs to do so. Matthew, who attended a rally in Chengdu with his roommate, noted that they never spoke about it again afterward. Several interviewees expressed envy toward protestors in places such as Hong Kong, where networks of mutual support were available.

While cautious about revealing their own involvement, participants were eager to ensure that the WPP was remembered and documented. All interviewees shared photos and videos on digital platforms, with many using Twitter or submitting materials to the

account of ‘Teacher Li.’ They observed others doing the same, resulting in multiple visual records of the same events circulating online. Some also shared their experiences with foreign media, either after leaving China or while still in the country. Those studying or working abroad after the WPP expressed a strong commitment to disseminating participants’ stories. As Matthew explained, ‘I feel the need to repeatedly talk about the many details of the WPP in order to ensure the accuracy and precision of the record.’

Hua, now studying overseas, decided to serve as a ‘tree hole,’ or confidential listener, for others seeking to share their WPP experiences, having himself endured an intensely lonely post protest period. Because of his visibility in foreign media, he was widely perceived as trustworthy and received numerous private messages from unknown participants. Recalling these interactions, he said, choking back tears:

Everyone feels so lonely and powerless. It’s both sad and horrifying that such large-scale actions in many cities, with so many participants, suddenly disappeared, leaving almost no trace behind.

Despite these experiences, none of the interviewees expressed regret about participating in the WPP. Instead, many described feeling inspired and comforted. Gao emphasized that the significance of the WPP lay less in specific political slogans than in the embodied experience of gathering offline and ‘encountering others face to face’ (肉身相見). Though fleeting, such moments were described as precious and unforgettable.

Taken together, these outcomes reveal the downstream effects of SAC: imitative acts and strategic isolation enabled momentary coalescence under repression but yielded neither durable ties nor solidarity; instead, participants were left with individualized coping and mediated remembrance. We address this paradox in the discussion.

Conclusion

The findings of this study complicate prevailing accounts of collective action under authoritarian rule by showing how collective presence can emerge without organization, coordination, or durable ties. Using the concept of SAC, this study demonstrates that digitally mediated imitation and strategic isolation – often treated as constraints on mobilization – can instead function as enabling conditions for participation in high-risk environments such as China, one of the world’s most sophisticated surveillance states. By lowering the threshold for individual action while minimizing exposure to repression, SAC allows atomized actors to converge briefly in shared spaces, producing moments of visibility and emotional resonance. Yet these same dynamics constrain the formation of enduring solidarity, replacing mutual support and collective meaning-making with isolated coping and mediated memory. This paradox – where the mechanisms that make collective visibility possible simultaneously erode its staying power – invites a rethinking of how contention unfolds and dissipates under pervasive surveillance.

Where existing frameworks emphasize decentralization or connective action as alternatives to hierarchical mobilization, SAC identifies a distinct mode of contention in which coordination is largely absent rather than redistributed. Decentralized movements presuppose some degree of networked interaction or shared strategic orientation, while connective action relies on digitally mediated ties to sustain

participation. In contrast, SAC is characterized by the deliberate avoidance of coordination, as actors treat social ties and communicative signaling as sources of risk rather than resources. Digital platforms function less as tools of mobilization than as arenas of observation, where individuals encounter symbolic acts and independently decide whether and how to imitate them. Collective appearance arises from the visible convergence of isolated actors in time and space, aligned by an implicit playbook of risk mitigation and symbolic signaling rather than by networks or leadership. By foregrounding strategic disconnection as an enabling condition, SAC extends theories of decentralized mobilization and clarifies how collective effects can emerge even when actors actively resist forming ties.

Several scope conditions warrant attention. First, SAC is not a general model of collective action but a situational mechanism that becomes salient where surveillance is pervasive, repression is rapid, and coordination itself is criminalized. In more permissive contexts, decentralized or connective forms of action may be more effective for sustaining mobilization. Second, the analysis relies on retrospective interviews, which may be shaped by post-event reflection, but the consistency of accounts across locations and levels of involvement suggests that the identified mechanisms are not idiosyncratic. Third, the study also focuses on short-lived episodes of contention and does not assess long-term political outcomes, limiting claims about institutional impact. Finally, while digital platforms facilitate imitation and visibility, SAC is not technologically deterministic: it depends on how actors interpret risk and strategically deploy disconnection rather than on platform affordances alone.

The continued relevance of SAC is evident in post-WPP China. The spontaneous mourning for former Premier Li Keqiang in late 2023 (Wong, 2023), for instance, manifested in the individualized placement of flowers at symbolic sites, served as an expression of political dissatisfaction under the protective guise of grief, a tactic consistent with SAC. The evolving dynamics of the Shanghai Halloween gatherings between 2023 and 2025 further illustrate SAC's adaptive capacity. In 2023, authorities were caught off guard by large, spontaneous costumed gatherings that showcased political satire and overwhelmed routine policing capacity (Goh, 2023). By 2024, heavy security cordons displaced rather than eliminated participation, as crowds reassembled in alternative locations (Lau, 2024). By 2025, a citywide dragnet had foreclosed mass gathering altogether, prompting resistance to atomize into scattered, individualized performances (HRIC, 2025). Under escalating repression, SAC did not collapse but fractured into resilient, symbolically aligned units, demonstrating its capacity to adapt through further atomization.

Comparatively, SAC also illuminates contention in other high-risk environments. For example, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, anti-war protests within Russia were met with immediate mass detention and the criminalization of coordination (Human Rights Watch, 2022; OVD-Info, 2023). As repression intensified, protesters increasingly acted alone or in fleeting clusters, relying on solitary and symbolic acts – blank signs, flowers, songs, graffiti, and temporal clustering around key events – rather than on sustained networks (Arkhipova & Lapshin, 2023; OVD-Info, 2024; Post, 2025). Collective presence emerged through imitative, atomized action rather than through durable connective infrastructures, which remained fragile, low in visibility, or displaced outside Russia (Østbø, 2017).

By contrast, Iran's Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement aligns more strongly with decentralized mobilization, sustained by informal networks, shared framing, and cross-sector participation (Tohidi, 2023). Nevertheless, SAC helps explain the protests' initial eruption after Mahsa Amini's death, as moral shock and social media visibility prompted the rapid, uncoordinated imitation of symbolic acts such as unveiling and hair-cutting (Afary & Anderson, 2023; Rouhi, 2022).

These cases suggest that SAC and decentralized mobilization are distinct but sometimes sequential mechanisms of contention. SAC is most salient where repression makes coordination prohibitively risky, while decentralized movements become viable when minimal relational infrastructures and framing coherence can be sustained. More broadly, SAC reframes collective action under authoritarianism by showing how atomization can operate as a situational resource rather than a barrier. As authoritarian regimes deploy digital technologies to fragment society and preempt organization (King et al., 2013), citizens increasingly repurpose that same atomization. In this sense, the 'lone brave individuals' who participated in the WPP were not anomalies; rather, they offer a blueprint for how dissent adapts and persists in the era of digital surveillance.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Luwei Rose Luqiu**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Yi Kang**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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