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FEATURES

The Long March to the White Paper Revolution: Understanding Recent COVID Protests in China

Eric S. Henry

One curious aspect of the democracy protests that rocked China in 1989 was the way in which they took so-called China experts by surprise. Frank Pieke, one such China expert and one of my own mentors, was doing fieldwork in Beijing at the time. He only became aware of the protest, which came to be known as the People's Movement, by chance, after stumbling upon an early demonstration in Tian'anmen Square while out for a walk. He commented later, "Still, there were no indications that the tensions could lead to widespread social unrest in the near future."[1] As we all know, they later did. Beginning on the night of June 3, 1989, and lasting for several days, students occupying downtown Beijing were assaulted and fired upon by soldiers charged with clearing the demonstration by any means necessary. The final death toll will likely never be known, but most unbiased estimates place it at over a thousand.[2]

I cannot therefore help but feel a sense of déjà vu as I hear about new protest events that happened recently in China. I have to confess they took me by surprise as well given the Chinese government's focus on promoting what, in the mid-2000s, President Hu Jintao called a "harmonious society," a strategy of resolving social conflict and inequality through shared prosperity. Although I am nearly certain we will not witness bloodshed on the same scale as three decades ago, the future of these protests and their impacts are not easy to predict. I will trace out the larger sociopolitical shifts in contemporary China that have brought us to this moment, while considering how these shifts have the potential to reconfigure the nature of China's ongoing development. Although on their surface the new protests are ostensibly about COVID restrictions and pandemic lockdowns, I would argue they are fundamentally tied to growing disillusionment with the post-Tian'anmen social contract that has propelled China to its status as a global power.

Recent Chinese Protests

Despite the popular media representations of China as a tightly controlled and unforgiving autocracy, protests in China are a common occurrence. I witnessed several protest events during the time I spent studying and doing fieldwork

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in Shenyang, a large city located about 400 miles northeast of Beijing. In 2013, for instance, rural peasants gathered at the city government building, squatting in front of the main gate to block access, while shouting slogans and demanding compensation for land appropriated by the state. Despite the relatively common occurrence of protest activities, however, China's state-controlled media rarely discusses them. Although social media has emerged as a new channel for spreading images and information about protest activity, the internet is tightly monitored and Chinese authorities move swiftly to censor such posts.

My first inkling that something new was afoot was the public display of banners hanging from the Sitong Bridge in one of Beijing's northwestern districts on October 13, 2022. The protest was timed to coincide with the Chinese Communist Party's 20th National Congress, during which President Xi Jinping consolidated his power and was awarded an unprecedented third term. The banners offered a list of grievances—pandemic lockdowns, authoritarianism, food scarcity—and ended with the phrase "We don't want to be slaves, but citizens" (*bu zuo nucai, zuo gongmin*). The identity of the man who hung the banners has not been confirmed, but photographs of the banners circulated quickly on social media and were just as quickly censored by the government.

This might have been but a blip on the radar if it had not been followed by even larger-scale protests. The first major one occurred a month later in November 2022 after a COVID outbreak swept through a Foxconn factory in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province and a six-hour train ride southwest of Beijing. The world's leading supplier of components for the Apple iPhone, Foxconn employs hundreds of thousands of workers in dozens of massive factories scattered throughout China. The outbreak led to a lockdown, causing many workers to flee conditions in which those who tested negative were quarantined with colleagues who had tested positive. The company put out a call for new hires, but the promised signing bonuses failed to materialize. In response, workers mobilized and marched through the vast manufacturing campus chanting anti-corporate slogans. They were met with force by police, and many videos of officers beating and kicking protesters as they dispersed the crowds circulated on social media.

As protests began to emerge in other Chinese cities, a fire broke out at an apartment building in Urumqi, a city in China's far west, on November 24, killing at least 10 people. Urumqi had been under a strict lockdown for three months to battle a COVID outbreak, with most people confined to their homes and suffering from isolation, sporadic food delivery and failing infrastructure. Many commentators claimed on social media that the building's fire escape doors had been locked and that the failure to control the fire was due to lockdown barriers blocking access by fire trucks. Protests in Urumqi quickly spread across the nation, with similar events happening in Shanghai and Beijing.

Like the Sitong Bridge protest, these also circulated explicit calls for the resignation of President Xi Jinping.[3]

New Forms of Surveillance and Censorship

Government responses to these protests illustrate a range of new techniques and technologies for quelling social unrest, many of which were pioneered in China's western Xinjiang region (where Urumqi itself is located). Although the predominant ethnic group in China is the Han Chinese, Xinjiang is largely populated by Muslim ethnic minorities such as Uyghurs and Kazakhs who are culturally distinct. Xinjiang has therefore long experienced periods of restlessness and agitation for independence. In response, during the 2010s, local and national governments embarked on a series of investments in smart surveillance technology under a process called "social management" (*shehui zhili*).[4]

There are several major components to these technologies. First, the government has been able to collect huge amounts of individualized data through domestic social media companies, particularly the WeChat platform, which has become essential for daily life in China. WeChat is not only a social network; it is a messaging app, digital wallet, ecommerce platform and government service portal. The lack of alternative platforms has made WeChat a boon for censorship and government monitoring.

Second, the government has installed digital surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition technology throughout cities in Xinjiang, allowing authorities to track an individual's movements. Third, numerous police billets and smart gates have been built at key intersections, pedestrian routes and entrances to schools, train stations, gas stations, hospitals and other locations. These gates require people to scan their identification cards in order to pass through, leaving a digital trace of their presence, but they also allow officials to corroborate the identity of the individual through fingerprint scanning.

These technologies, created to monitor ethnic populations in China's west, are now being rolled out throughout the nation. Protesters in China today are therefore finding themselves monitored in ways that were impossible even a few years ago. In addition, censorship of Chinese social media channels by the state makes it difficult for protesters to organize or coordinate with each other. One way of evading government censors, the use of virtual private networks that bypass Chinese internet controls, is illegal in China, and police have been examining people's phones during spot checks to look for these apps or for evidence of protest activity.

The Chinese state is therefore positioned, in ways that would be difficult in other countries, to identify individual protesters, censor dissent and punish those who take part in these activities. This is the major reason that the

protests have dwindled after their initial burst onto the scene in November 2022. That is not to say, however, that the underlying problems have been resolved.

What Prompted the Protests?

After the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in China was brought under control in the spring of 2020, the government embarked on what came to be called a zero-COVID strategy.[5] This involved a rigid approach to controlling the virus through quarantines, testing and lockdowns. People arriving in China or crossing provincial borders had to reside in a quarantine hotel for a period of 10 days. Swab tests were administered daily at the entrances to residential apartment complexes, and negative tests had to be shown to use public transit and enter most public spaces such as shopping malls, schools or workplaces. If a single positive case was detected, entire neighborhoods and even districts could be shut down: businesses were closed, residents were confined to their homes and all direct contact between people was avoided. Since the protests, the government has responded by significantly relaxing the zero-COVID policy, bringing its own set of problems caused by soaring infection rates and hospitalizations.[6]

In one sense, zero-COVID was a tremendously effective pandemic response. Infection rates and death rates in China, after the initial outbreak was contained, were extremely low compared to other countries.[7] At the same time, however, the economic and social impacts of this policy have been profound. Despite diversification and technological investments, China is still an export-oriented economy. Pandemic controls and lockdowns have severely impacted manufacturing and transport of goods, affecting economic growth.[8] No less severe have been the impacts on individuals who have often been confined to their homes for weeks at a time as infections in their area were slowly brought under control.

These restrictions on individual liberty and movement were therefore the explicit object of much protest activity in October and November of 2022. But recall that the protests not only opposed COVID restrictions but also called for the resignation of President Xi Jinping, China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong. In other words, the underlying discontent that contributed to the size and scale of the protests has not been addressed by the government.

In July 2022, the youth unemployment rate in China reached 19.9 percent according to official statistics, the highest on record.[9] Higher education has exploded in China over the past 20 years as more and more young people strive for professional employment and a more affluent lifestyle. The expansion of employment opportunities, however, has not kept pace. Not only are many youths unemployed but those with university degrees often resign themselves to relatively low-status jobs as security guards or service employees. Meanwhile,

costs for everything from real estate to education have skyrocketed. Although the one-child policy that restricted family size from 1980 onwards has been eased, most families are still choosing to limit themselves to one child due to the immense financial investment required.[10]

The White Paper Revolution

One solution for many Chinese families has been education abroad. Degrees from foreign universities carry tremendous prestige in China's labor market, and students usually return to China with additional language abilities and job skills. The number of returnees is increasing every year; in 2018 it was over half a million people.[11]

But many of those returnees experience a sense of disaffection. Their ability to consume foreign media and entertainment through platforms such as Google, YouTube and Facebook is limited by China's internet censorship. Gmail and Instagram can no longer be accessed, and foreign media channels are routinely blocked. The sense of openness and freedom that many returned students experienced abroad is particularly constrained under China's internet controls, and these feelings have become widespread among a young generation increasingly disillusioned with the relentless competition and pressure to succeed in China today. One of the buzzwords on the Chinese internet in 2022 was "lying flat" (*tangping*), a social movement that eschews this kind of striving and advocates for withdrawing from professional careers; in a telling move, the term "lying flat" has since been banned on the Chinese internet. All of this has contributed to a growing sense of disillusionment with a government that seems increasingly out of touch with China's youth.

Aside from virtual private networks, another means of circumventing internet controls in China is through language. Chinese is a tonal language, so most words have very similar homophones if spoken with slightly different tones. Let's say you want to make a demand that China's president resign. Writing the words "step down" (*xiatai*) in a post would lead to it being quickly taken down by internet censors. But you could use the words "shrimp moss" (*xiatai*, but said using slightly different tones) and, for a little while, the message will stay up.[12] These kinds of censorship gymnastics are common on the Chinese internet, so that one set of characters can easily come to stand in for another, more prohibited, set.

This idea has been carried to its logical extreme in one of the most poignant symbols of these protests: people holding aloft blank pieces of paper, which has given the name White Paper Revolution to this current round of protest activity. The practice appears to have originated in Hong Kong in protests against the National Security Law that cemented Beijing's grip over the region but have now spread throughout China. Where one set of Chinese characters can stand in for another known set of characters, this practice takes that to

its logical extreme; a blank piece of paper can stand in for something else, a non-message that is as powerfully articulate as a message. Since almost everyone knows what the protests are about, the blank paper is all one needs to do to show their opposition. And blank pieces of paper are harder than literal messages for automated censorship algorithms to track and block.

Two Social Contracts

So what does this all mean? How does the White Paper Revolution connect to the People's Movement of 1989? And where will these protests lead China in the coming years?

In many ways, the People's Movement marked the end of an era underwritten by a social contract between the socialist state and its citizens. It is important to remember that the leaders battling a corrupt government during the Communist Revolution of the 1940s took the idea of liberation seriously: the success of their cause would free the masses from both the economic exploitation of capitalism and the crooked politics of that era. Under socialism, all things were possible and, rhetorically at least, it was the People themselves who would provide the correct way forward. Despite famines and hardships, the theme of the socialist era was of a gradually empowered public waking to its own autonomy and collective sovereignty. The massacre at Tian'anmen Square in 1989 effectively ended this dogma and led to a massive reconfiguration of Chinese self-state relations. The earlier idealism that defined the socialist project faded from memory and was forgotten.

In her book *The People's Republic of Amnesia*, journalist Louisa Lim writes: "The 'forgetting' that has engulfed China is not just enforced from above; the people themselves have colluded in this amnesia and embraced it. Forgetting is a survival mechanism, almost second nature. … There is no benefit to remembering, so why bother?"[13] I witnessed this forgetting, too, whenever I spoke to people—often people who had discussed many other aspects of their lives with me—about the pre-1989 past. Their time spent laboring in the countryside after the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s or marching for democracy in the 1980s was dismissed as irrelevant to today's life. Instead, people usually turned my attention back to the changes of the 1990s and the subsequent economic miracle.

The revolutionary class politics of the Maoist era were replaced during the 1990s by a carefully managed technocratic process of modernization—one guided by elites and experts, the economists and engineers. The revolutionaries of 1989 abandoned their idealism for the pragmatic realism of the individual struggle for prosperity. Instead of the people liberating themselves and guiding the socialist state, the state would harness the cooperation of the people for the benefit of all, as in President Hu Jintao's dream of a "harmonious society."

This entailed, however, that the people need to be managed, disciplined and reformed in order for the promises of economic development and modernization to be fulfilled.

The most recent round of protests indicates that this new social contract is beginning to break down. The struggle to build a solid economic basis for future prosperity has been found to benefit only the few, and the promises of modernization have failed to materialize for the majority of the population. The ideal of a meritocratic society, where success is a product of hard work and willingness to subsume one's independence to a benevolent state, has fallen short in the face of ongoing corruption, environmental degradation and persistent forms of inequality. The heavy-handed state response to COVID is but one manifestation of a "harmonious society" gone awry. Despite the state's far-reaching capabilities to manage dissent, disseminate propaganda and control the social narrative, the White Paper Revolution—for all its short-lived transience—appears to be a sign of more to come.

Notes

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7. The exception has been Hong Kong, which experienced the highest level of deaths per capita than any other country up to that point during the Omicron wave. This has been attributed to relatively lax quarantine enforcement, uneven vaccination rates, and the status of Hong Kong as an international transportation hub.
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