The A4 Movement: Mapping its Background and Impact

Patricia M. Thornton

Although not the primary cause that prompted the sudden reversal of Xi Jinping's signature "zero-COVID" policy, the protests that swept twenty-one provinces and over two hundred college and university campuses in late November no doubt played a role in the timing of the decision. Yet, neither the excessive zeal with which the coronavirus prevention measures were applied at the local level nor the resulting rise in social discontent were surprising or unpredictable. Both were the result of an increasingly autocratic system that demands absolute adherence to an increasingly infeasible task and places downward pressures on the social grassroots. The "blank page" protests brought together three disparate groups – the urban working class, suffering economic deprivation caused by the rolling lockdowns; the middle-class urbanites and university students, suffering from "lockdown fatigue"; and an exploding solidarity movement of overseas Chinese students and members of the next-generation Chinese diaspora, who provided support via social media. Predictably, public security officials attempted to defuse, dissipate, and contain these groups, and propaganda organs appeared poised to declare the end of "zero-COVID" as a public relations victory. The ongoing search for nefarious "foreign forces," allegedly behind the protests, highlights the inability of China's repressive apparatus to recognize the fact that the unorganized interests behind the protests were unlikely to have been driven by a larger anti-state agenda.

On January 21, 2019, hours after the release of data showing that the Chinese economy had posted the slowest annual growth in twenty-eight years, Xi Jinping warned provincial and ministerial cadres at an event at the Central Party School that it was vital that the party forecast accurately unprecedented "black swan" incidents that could wreck major havoc and that it also guard against those predictable but frequently ignored "gray rhino" events.[1] Two years later, with COVID-19 raging rampant across the globe, at a collective study meeting of the Politburo in January 2021 Xi again insisted that the success of the 14th Five-year Plan required that the leadership identify both "black swan" and "gray rhino" events that might, as a result of China's efforts to control local coronavirus outbreaks, destabilize economic development.[2]

If the events of October and November 2022 serve as any guide, such lessons were neither learned nor applied by the party: although the outbreak of COVID-19 was a classic "black swan" event, the rising social discontent that led to the cascade of public protests was neither unforeseen nor unpredictable. At the national level, economic slowdowns, exacerbated by iterative rolling lockdowns across much of the country, record levels of youth unemployment, and the collapsing property bubble (which also severely cut into the finances of local governments) were chipping away at the fortunes and prospects of the urban middle class. Two and half years of periodic lockdowns frayed the patience of many and put the education and social development of a generation at risk. Finally, the arbitrary manner in which the lockdown policies were enforced, with wide variations at the lowest levels, eroded public trust in local-, if not higher-level, authorities.

Beyond these factors, however, is the more fundamental structural shift wrought by the imposition of a single nationwide standard across much of the population. In this sense, the

"black swan" of COVID-19 gave birth to not one but two "gray rhinos": both the response of local governments to the party core's unrelenting "zero-COVID" policy and the brief but widespread flare-up of popular protests followed the well-worn tracks of previous policy excesses. Under Xi's continued centralization of power, his oft-repeated commitment to carry out a "people's war" to eradicate the virus[3] and to ramp up disciplinary sanctions against lower-level officials predictably produced a sprawling machinery of local governance singularly focused on the eradication of COVID cases at all costs, with the expected excesses at the grassroots as amply documented in previous campaigns. The attendant vast expansion of surveillance and control measures at the social grassroots, often implemented by untrained and hastily recruited volunteers and unskilled workers,[4] also unsurprisingly provoked collective discontent that culminated in the so-called "A4 protests" that swept twenty-one provinces and over two hundred college and university campuses in late November.[5] The volatile combination of Xi's insistent pursuit of "zero-COVID" against a constantly mutating virus, a state machinery that had neither the power nor the capacity to fine-tune Xi's unattainable aim, and an army of largely unskilled grassroots agents mobilized to implement the policy generated a perfect storm that activated unorganized interests on a cross-regional scale. By replicating the experience and deprivations of the lockdown, testing, and quarantines throughout much of the country, Xi's unrelenting insistence on "zero-COVID" created conditions that briefly enabled the collective mobilization of unorganized interests[6] on a scale arguably not seen in China since 1989.

Early Fissures Created by the "Zero-COVID" System

It is important to recall that the initial draconian lockdown successfully suppressed the outbreak in Wuhan in 2020 and that most of the country remained largely COVID-free for the better part of two years while the rest of the world was staggering under the weight of the mutating virus and alarming death rates. However, the emergence of the less deadly but far more transmissible Omicron variant proved to be a stiff challenge to China's established mass quarantine and testing regime. When COVID-19 began circulating in Shanghai in March 2022, the municipal authorities, wary of the impact of virus mitigation efforts on the economy and the lives of its citizens. initially attempted to manage the outbreak using a more nuanced approach.[7] Shanghai officials experimented with a regimen that involved rolling 48-hour restrictions and mass testing conducted in individual neighborhoods, allowing large swathes of the local economy to continue functioning more or less as usual. A city-wide lockdown, it was originally argued, would "impact the entire national economy and the global economy" to an extent that could leave "many international cargo ships floating in the East China Sea."[8] When such policies failed to stop the virus's spread, Party Secretary Li Qiang came under significant pressure to impose a "phased" version of the "hard lockdown" technique that had been imposed in Wuhan. He took the unusual step of circulating an open letter addressed to all CCP members in the city that called on them to conquer COVID-19 "under the strong leadership of the party's Central Committee with President Xi at its core," a move that was reportedly received with astonishment by locals, who read the move as kowtowing to Beijing. Photographs of fellow Politburo member Sun Chunlan lecturing Li Qiang appeared in the national press, fueling local speculation that his promotion prospects were on the line.[9] Reversing course on his initially more nuanced strategy, Li suspended three municipal officials for their poor performance in meeting zero-COVID targets. Shanghai received 38,000 health workers from other provinces, including 2,000 PLA medical personnel, to oversee imposition of the "hard quarantine" model used in Wuhan.[10] Barricades were erected throughout densely populated urban neighborhoods with little warning, bisecting the city and cutting it into smaller containment units that were policed by hazmat-

clad personnel. The result was a shambolic lockdown that lasted far longer than originally expected and created widespread shortages of food and basic supplies for the unprepared Shanghai residents.[11] But the Shanghai reversal also sent a powerful signal across the country that more nuanced localized responses to circulation of the virus would not be tolerated. At the Politburo Standing Committee meeting Xi chaired in early May, he stressed the importance of "unswervingly adhering to the dynamic zero-COVID policy and resolutely fighting any attempts to distort, question, or dismiss China's anti-COVID policy." The read-out from the meeting vigorously reasserted that only Xi's "time-tested epidemic control policy" would succeed in stamping out the virus in Shanghai[12] and elsewhere across the country. At the Shanghai Municipal Party Congress in June, Li Qiang declared that the city's experience with Omicron had in fact proved that the party Central Committee's "zero-COVID" decision-making and implementation were "completely correct."[13]

Leading up to the October Twentieth Party Congress, the hard quarantine, mass testing, and rolling lockdown policy was doubled down and up to 300 million people were placed under various stages of a lockdown across the country.[14] Popular discontent with the stringent local implementation had been building for months, particularly among those segments of the population – such as university students and factory workers in large compounds – that had been subjected to various forms of stringent "closed loop" pandemic management that was confining them to their dormitories indefinitely.[15] But as more transmissible variants continued to spread, and rolling city-wide lockdowns became increasingly common, quarantined residents turned to social media not only to purchase goods online for home delivery but increasingly to self-organize and share their personal stories of hardship and deprivation. As a result, social media were quickly flooded with tales of frustration from individuals and communities stranded by broken supply chains and widening chasms in social service provision, and, in some cases, stories of heart-breaking tragedies wrought by the unyielding pursuit of "zero-COVID."

Some of the more egregious cases included a night-time bus crash that killed twenty-seven Guizhou residents who were being ferried to a remote quarantine facility in violation of existing regulations;[16] a three-year-old boy who died of carbon monoxide poisoning when his family was denied emergency medical care because they lived in an area of Lanzhou that was considered "high risk;"[17] and a pregnant woman locked down Xi'an who miscarried just outside a hospital emergency room where she had been detained for two hours because she was unable to provide a sufficiently up-to-date negative PCR test.[18] In nearly all of these cases, a vast online audience of Chinese viewers – many of whom were also experiencing various degrees of quarantine or restrictions – watched these and other tragedies unfold virtually, in real time, generating a roiling "agonistic public sphere"[19] that was nonetheless partially sustained by the expectation that a moderate relaxation of the COVID restrictions might follow the Twentieth Party Congress.

However, the appearance on Beijing's Sitong Bridge of a lone protestor only days before the opening of the party congress proved to be a pivotal turning point that catalyzed popular discontent. "We want food, not PCR tests. We want freedom, not lockdowns. We want respect, not lies. We want reform, not a Cultural Revolution. We want a vote, not a leader. We want to be citizens, not slaves," read one banner, while a second called on students to boycott classes, workers to stage strikes, and the Communist Party – and Xi Jinping personally – to step down. Although quickly removed by local police, the messages circulated widely on social media, both in and outside of China,[20] triggering a repetition of these demands on university campuses across the globe. The demands continued to circulate

as well within China, where they were posted in public places, such as restrooms, and they were anonymously Airdropped to the iPhones of subway commuters.[21] But aside from prompting the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau to demand that photocopy shops require that customers register with their real names and to mandate a system update for iPhones that limited the opt-in "Everyone" usage of Airdrop to ten minutes,[22] little else was done to address the issues at stake. Not only did the regime take no steps to address the deeper causes of the brewing discontent but, to the contrary, Xi doubled down on his signature "zero-COVID" policy, insisting at the party congress that the "all-out people's war" being waged against the virus had achieved "significant positive results" for the entire country and giving no sign that it would be abandoned even after the congress had successfully concluded.[23]

"Twenty Measures" and "Ten Questions"

Two weeks later, workers at Foxconn, the largest iPhone assembly plant in China, broke out of the factory compound where a "sealed management" protocol had been imposed. Foxconn's "closed loop" system – which had been developed to allow China to host the Winter Olympics and the Paralympic Games months before and had earned high praise from the Chairman himself – banned workers from leaving, and, in some cases, since mid-October had confined them to their dormitory rooms. The situation at Foxconn became so dire that hundreds of migrant workers were filmed scaling fences and overwhelming security personnel in a bid to walk back to their hometowns, in some cases up to 40km (25 miles) away.[24] Sources would later admit that Foxconn founder Terry Gou had already written to the central leaders in Beijing, likely along with other business leaders and foreign chambers of commerce, to warn that if the "zero-COVID" policies were to continue, China was in danger of losing its status as the "factory of the world."[25] Within days, *Health Times*, a subsidiary of *People's Daily*, posted on social media the observation that for the vast majority of people COVID symptoms were "short-lived and mild."[26] On November 11, the State Council released "Twenty Measures" to "optimize" control of the COVID epidemic, its ninth update to the national COVID control measures, proposing a limited relaxation of the strict "zero-COVID" policy to which the country had already been committed for nearly three years.[27]

Yet the leadership's political signaling regarding the shift went awry, in part because the Center had long been issuing dire injunctions to local cadres to "increase vigilance, adhere to bottom-line thinking" in order to "extinguish the virus completely."[28] As had been proven by the March–April case in Shanghai , there was a widespread perception that local COVID-19 outbreaks would be read as evidence that the authorities were just "lying down" [躺平] on the job; based on data from a variety of state media and party disciplinary organs, Bloomberg reported that by May 2022, over 4,000 local officials had been dismissed, demoted, or otherwise disciplined in connection with fifty-one COVID-19 outbreaks across the country.[29]

As a result, these conflicting signals from the Center created a considerable lack of clarity at the local levels about whether and how to implement the "Twenty Measures." Neither Xi nor any Politburo Standing Committee member made any public announcement openly acknowledging a shift in policy, leaving many in doubt; the general public was likewise apprehensive about opening up, having been subjected to alarming reports about the extraordinarily high COVID death counts abroad. For example, on November 14 a rumor circulated that Shijiazhuang, a city 160 miles southwest of Beijing, would serve as a pilot site for a reopening, thus igniting widespread public panic. Parents kept their children home from school, traffic on public transport dropped precipitously, and the city's 11 million residents

began stockpiling traditional Chinese medicines. A similar response was noted in Chongqing, China's most populous city, where, after the relaxation of zero-COVID was announced, use of public transportation collapsed from an average of 2.75 million rides per day to a mere 61,000,.[30]

The official media attempted to explain and to reassure the public. "Optimizing and adjusting COVID prevention and control measures is not opening up and 'lying flat,'" *China Youth Daily* insisted;[31] *Global Times* counseled its readers that the new "Twenty Measures" were not at all "lying flat" in the face of Omicron, but instead they represented a new effort to "seek the greater good for the greatest number."[32] Netizens remained sceptical: on November 22, a WeChat public account, under the name of Chang'an Classroom [长安课堂], posted "Ten Questions" for China's National Health Commission, was quickly censored, but not before it had garnered over 10,000 downloads, views, and shares.[33] The "Ten Questions" stimulated a highly public interrogation of the country's "zero-COVID" measures by posing a series of probing inquiries: "Have any influenza viruses in history ever been wiped out by human beings? If not, why is it that COVID can be eradicated? If it cannot be eradicated, then what kind of price must be paid to eliminate an invisible and intangible virus? Does the National Health Commission think that this year's extended lockdowns in Xinjiang, Tibet, and other areas are appropriate?"[34] But it was perhaps the author's final question that stimulated the largest response from the public: having seen the opening ceremony of the World Cup in Qatar, the author of the "Ten Questions" asked why the crowd had not worn masks nor had it been required to submit negative PCR test results in order to attend: "Don't they live on the same planet as we do?"[35] Needless to say, the official censors quickly sprang into action, blocking not only the original "Ten Questions" but also, the phrase "the eleventh question," a pre-emptive prediction that the original post would soon be deleted. Also censored was footage of the maskless crowd attending the World Cup. CCTV cameramen in Qatar were directed to focus on close-up shots of players and coaches instead of capturing views of cheering unmasked crowds.[36]

Regardless, lacking clear assurances from the Center, municipal authorities in areas experiencing rising numbers of cases reverted to variations of the earlier draconian lockdown policies. Zhengzhou, home to a Foxconn facility where violent protests were still roiling, ordered residents in eight city districts to remain at home for five days except for trips to collect basic necessities. Guangzhou locked down its central Baiyun District, and Shijiazhuang enjoined residents to remain at home in order to conduct a new round of city-wide testing. Beijing authorities likewise began locking down certain areas of the city where cases had been detected, and an exhibition center was converted into a makeshift hospital as the number of COVID cases hit a new all-time high under the weight of Omicron.[37] Legal obligations across layers of government and between authorities and the public had become so muddled by the mixed signals of the "Twenty Measures" that legal experts proffered advice to ordinary citizens about dealing with the potentially conflicting demands imposed on them by neighborhood committees, village governments, and property managers engaged in "excessive epidemic prevention and control."[38] Social media videos began circulating reports of residents in various cities refusing to submit to rounds of PCR testing, accusing local quarantine enforcement personnel of rights violations, and resisting the demands of the hazmat-clad "big whites" (大白) to restrict their movement. One video clip that went viral on China's social media depicted a young man in Chongqing wearing a Superman backpack loudly scolding some "big whites" of being "running dogs" and claiming that "there is only one disease in this world, and that is being poor and unfree, and we're all suffering from it! Give me liberty or give me death!" When the police moved in to grab him, the crowd

intervened, allowing the "Chongqing Superman" to escape. Other videos that circulated briefly on social media showed crowds destroying testing booths, railings, and barricades in various locations around the country as anger, frustration, and confusion continued to build.[39]

The Urumqi Fire and the A4 Protests

Amid the deteriorating situation, on November 24 a raging fire in a high-rise building in Urumqi claimed more than ten lives because the exit doors had been welded shut from the outside. It was quickly revealed that the building was located in a designated "low risk" area for COVID-19 that had nonetheless been locked down for over a hundred days.[40] The *Uyghur Times* pegged the actual death count at forty-four after interviewing local residents and neighbors, who, also quarantined, live-streamed the inferno and cries of the victims.[41] Others shared footage of the long arc of pressurized fire hoses mounted on trucks unable to reach the blaze, partly because the cars of locked-down and quarantined residents were blocking access to the building. Public outrage was further triggered when local officials, at a press conference held the next day, denied that the doors to the apartment block had been sealed from the outside, instead blaming the deaths on the "weak self-defense and self-rescue skills" (**居民自防自救能力弱**) of the victims, which included several children under the age of 12.[42] The following day, social media was awash with video clips featuring throngs of enraged residents marching in several administrative districts of Urumqi and calling for an end to the lockdowns and other "zero-COVID" policies, with some brandishing PRC flags and singing the national anthem and *The Internationale*. "The people's police exist for the people, [but] you suppress the people!" the marchers chanted. Several local officials in various locations were recorded attempting to placate the crowds, with the local party secretary promising on the following day to lift the strictest lockdown measures in all areas deemed to be "low risk."[43]

Yet word of the fire and the official response provided at the press conference had already sparked sympathy demonstrations and vigils elsewhere, particularly on university campuses. Students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, Nanjing Forestry University, and Sichuan Film and Television Academy held vigils on November 25; when posters commemorating the victims of the Urumqi fire were allegedly removed by school authorities at Nanjing Media and Communications University for violating school regulations regarding the permissible content of public posters, one female student stood in silent protest while holding a blank sheet of A4 paper – a tactic that had also been used by Hong Kong'ers protesting China's restrictive National Security Law in 2020 as well as by Russians protesting the war in Ukraine.[44] A widely circulated video on social media showed an unidentified man snatching a blank sheet of paper from her hands while she continued to stand, unmoved, with her arms raised as if the paper were still there. The video went viral, and the gesture was copied by crowds that congregated in Beijing and Shanghai, the sites of the two largest gatherings on the evening of the 26th as a wave of protests and vigils over the course of that weekend swept through at least thirty-nine cities across the country.[45]

The protesters on Shanghai's Middle Urumqi Street in the old French Concession lit white candles and left flowers beneath the street sign to commemorate the victims of the Xinjiang fire. As the crowd grew, chants broke out calling for an end to measures associated with "zero-COVID," and even for both Xi Jinping and the CCP to step down, before the police moved in to suppress the protests. In Beijing, in the area of Liangma Bridge near the Third Ring Road, hundreds of residents marched with candles and flowers, singing *The Internationale* and creating a makeshift memorial for those who had died in Urumqi.[46]

However, the singing soon turned to calls for freedom and an end to the lockdowns, even for freedom of the press. The crowd, which included a large number of young women in their 20s and 30s, also waved blank sheets of A4 paper and chanted their support for Sitong Bridge protestor Peng Lifa [Peng Zaizhou] and his demands. "The white paper represents everything we want to say but cannot say," one Liangma Bridge protestor told a Reuters reporter.[47] When the police sternly warned the crowd not to call for an end to the lockdowns and the PCR tests, they switched tactics and began calling for more lockdowns and additional tests: "Continue lockdowns! I want to do Covid tests!" The tactic of ironic reversal was echoed online, with social media filling up with messages repeating single Chinese words ad nauseam: "good, good, good, good," "yes, yes, yes, yes," and "right, right, right, right." Other messages were equally oblique: student protestors at Beijing's prestigious Qinghua University waved pages of a complex mathematical equation devised by Russian physicist Alexander Friedmann, either because his surname in Chinese is homophonous with "free man,"[48] or, perhaps, because the equation is taken as proof that "the basic reality of the universe is constant, eternal expansion, or put another way, opening up."[49]

Regime Responses

Sensitive to the fact that social media were widely relied upon by the protestors, Chinese censors not only deleted content related to the protests but also deployed diversionary tactics. Fake "bot" accounts flooded social media platforms with suggestive and even pornographic imagery supposedly linked to city names in which demonstrations and vigils were being held in order to frustrate netizens seeking information about recent events. Greatfire.org, an organization that seeks to assist netizens in China wishing to circumvent censorship, issued a warning that Twitter – a platform blocked in China – was nonetheless awash with semi-pornographic spam about "escort services" that tagged "Urumqi" beginning on November 25.[50] Within days, similar patterns were noted for Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Beijing, Hangzhou, Shanghai, and other locations where protests had taken place.[51]

Leaked documents from China's Cyberspace Administration called upon all relevant units to initiate a Level I Internet Emergency Response, "the highest level of content management."[52] The Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission in Beijing issued a separate directive warning that it would "resolutely crack down on infiltration and sabotage activities by hostile forces" on the Tuesday following the weekend demonstrations.[53] Municipal public security officials made ample use of cell-phone location data to track participants in the series of protests, contacting them days later and telling them to report to their local police stations for questioning. In Shanghai, where protestors for two consecutive nights had called for Xi to step down, police made random stop-and-search checks of the mobile phones of residents on the streets and in local subway stations, looking for virtual private networks (VPNs) or end-to-end encrypted communication apps (like Signal and Telegram), which were used by protesters to coordinate their movements in real time. Other participants were identified by either the ubiquitous facial recognition cameras in major urban areas, grassroots informants, or by backtracking the close contacts of those who had been arrested at the events.[54]

Although there was no official acknowledgment of the protests by the central authorities, during his December 2 meeting with EU Council President Charles Michel, Xi was uncharacteristically dismissive about the A4 protests, admitting "that after three years of Covid-19 he had an issue because people were frustrated. It was mainly students, or teenagers in university"; he further indicated that his government would soon be loosening controls in

response.[55] Indeed, a further "New Ten Measures," all but dismantling China's sprawling "zero-COVID" regime, were released five days later, on December 7, in a move that *New York Times* labeled a "victory for the protestors." The negative PCR test requirement to use public transportation was lifted and those with mild or asymptomatic cases of COVID were no longer required to move to a quarantine facility. Instead, they could quarantine at home.[56] The testing booths and dreaded quarantine facilities that had mushroomed in nearly every urban district and most villages were dismantled, and the small army of migrant workers who comprised the bulk of the "big white" enforcers were summarily dismissed and sent home, some of them without receiving their promised wages in full.[57]

On December 31, 2022, *People's Daily* issued an authoritative commentary suggesting that China's reclassification of COVID-19 from a "Class A" to a "Class B" transmissible illness a few weeks earlier had been "welcomed" by foreign chambers of commerce for "bringing more benefits to the development of the global economy," but it continued to insist on the infallibility of the decision-making process at the Center: "Our country's epidemic prevention and control policies are correct, scientific, and effective."[58]

Xi's New Year's address delivered the following day largely struck the same tone, although he admitted that "It is only natural for different people to have different concerns or hold different views on the same issue. What matters is that we build consensus through communication and consultation."[59] In a lengthy "important commentary" reprising the evolution of Xi's signature "zero-COVID" policy and its reversal, released a week later, Xinhua likewise acknowledged that "in late November 2022, some people reflected their grave concerns about lockdown measures in some areas, multiple layers of bureaucracy, and other prevention and control issues … [but] with a population of more than 1.4 billion, different people will naturally have different views and make different demands with respect to the same issue."[60] Although Xinhua's ten-thousand word excursus was read by some outside of China as an indirect admission that not only had the A4 protests forced the party-state to reverse course[61] but also that inside China the official state media consistently proffered two alternative narratives: first, that it was the wisdom of the Party Central Committee – with Xi at the core – that foresaw the reopening of China once the less lethal Omicron emerged, thereby protecting the lives of the Chinese people when the virus was at its most deadly and relaxing controls only once the virus had weakened, proving the wisdom of the "zero-COVID" approach.[62] Second, an unofficial army of voices on Chinese social media toyed with blaming the anti-lockdown protestors of late November for the deaths that resulted once the controls were lifted, descrying them as "flat-lying bandits" and even suggesting that they may have been working with China's "enemies" to defame the country.[63] Lu Shaye, China's ambassador to France, for example, insisted that the blank A4 paper protests "reeked" of a presumably foreign-provoked "color revolution" – because, he said, "after all, white is also a color" – although he declined to provide evidence to support his claims.[64]

Not a Revolution, But Three Movements?

Zuo Ye, a self-described activist who has long experience of working with NGOs and grassroots groups in China, observed in an extended essay that the "A4 protests" of late November that seemed to have been ignited by the tragedy in Urumqi were in fact three distinct movements that arose from the "systemic humanitarian disaster and political and economic crisis caused by the three years of 'zero-COVID'" in China. These included a crisis of the working class, whose livelihoods were put at serious risk by the economic deprivations

caused by the rolling lockdowns; the middle-class urbanites and university students motivated by "lockdown fatigue" and rising mistrust of state and party officials; and the exploding solidarity movement of overseas Chinese students and members of the next-generation Chinese diaspora. The gap created by popular expectations that the lockdowns might finally be relaxed in the wake of the Twentieth Party Congress and the actuality of continued restrictions created political space to bring together these three strands. The lone Sitong Bridge protestor's far-reaching demands lent discursive kindling to the long-brewing discontent among all three groups. Yet, lacking a civic or social infrastructure that might have supported alliances among the three movements, the protests flared briefly and then quickly fizzled out.[65]

Predictably, the repression of suspected participants in China has by no means ended. The party-state's response to the collective mobilization of the disorganized and dispersive interests described by Zuo Ye has typically been to defuse, dissipate, and contain on a case-by-case basis.[66] Municipal public security officials rounded up many or most of the participants in the first wave of protests by scraping geolocation data from cell-phone towers, forcing the protesters to turn over their mobile phones for inspection, and then requiring that they sign blank arrest warrants – a de facto promise not to participate in any similar actions in the future.[67] After reconstructing their WeChat networks, the authorities have re-arrested some of those who were originally detained in the aftermath of the events of late November– many of whom are young women – in an attempt to ascertain their connections, if any, to "foreign forces."[68] At least some of the re-arrested protestors have been interrogated about their participation in women's book clubs, their use of messaging platforms based overseas, their involvement in feminist activities, and their sexual orientation. According to family and friends, dozens remain either in active detention or held in "secure locations" where they continue to be interrogated in the dogged attempt to uncover any institutional links to groups not under the control of the party-state.[69] One re-arrested protestor was a member of a WeChat group of twenty mostly university-educated women who met both on and offline to trade gossip and meet up for organized dinners. They attended film festivals and stand-up comedy performances together. Some of them even had joined a crowd outside the courthouse to support Zhou Xiaoxuan, the female accuser in a sexual harassment case against a well-known male television presenter who was appealing the verdict of a Chinese court that in the previous year had dismissed her case,[70] no doubt leading the investigating authorities to assume a "feminist" motivation to her participation. Unsurprisingly, taking heed of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission directive, local authorities will predictably continue to "resolutely crack down on infiltration and sabotage activities by hostile forces," even in the absence of clear evidence that such forces exist.

Yet the continued search for "foreign forces" may elide a deeper vulnerability for the regime: even in the absence of direct organizational links between the A4 protestors and those overseas, it is clear that may of those who gathered had in fact not only learned, but actively employed, tactics utilized during the leaderless protests that rocked Hong Kong beginning in 2019. One participant who is enrolled in a university in Shanghai conveyed to a reporter that the "tips" gleaned from the Hong Kong protestors had proved "really helpful," including turning off electronic devices before leaving home, using cash to avoid leaving a digital footprint, and wearing face masks to conceal their identities: "The goal is to 'be water' , which is to proceed organically depending on the situation, and adapt according to the changing circumstance, like the fluidity of water."[71] It may well be that, despite its best

efforts to crush expressions of collective dissent moving forward, China's increasingly tech-savvy population may yet manage to keep a half-step ahead of the regime.

Patricia M. Thornton is an associate professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations, the Dickson Poon China Centre, and a Fellow of Merton College, at the University of Oxford. She is the author of "Disciplining the State: Virtue, Violence, and State-Making in Modern China," co-editor (with Vivienne Shue) of "To Govern China: Evolving Practices of Power," and many peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals. She is also the former Acting Editor-in-Chief of The China Quarterly. Her research focuses on the Chinese Communist Party, party-building, civil society, and popular protest in transnational China.

---

[1] "习近平：防范化解重大风险，既要高度警惕'黑天鹅'事件，也要防范'灰犀牛'事件," 党建网, May 7, 2022, https://archive.ph/DflEY
[2] "习近平：做好应对 '黑天鹅' '灰犀牛'预案 ," 大公报, January 30, 2021, https://archive.ph/lCONI
[3] "Xi Focus: Xi Vows to Win People's War Against Novel Coronavirus," Xinhua News, February 11, 2020, https://archive.ph/AXH9z
[4] Arjun Neil Alim, Kai Waluszewski, and Eleanor Olcott, "'No One Remembers Us': China's 'Big White' Pandemic Workers Reel From End of Zero-Covid," *Financial Times*, February 3, 2022, https://archive.ph/8Chyk
[5] "网络博弈：白纸运动白皮书记录运动规模、组织和警方动态," 自由亚洲电台[RFA], February 1, 2023, https://archive.ph/RzcL7 ; 端傳媒編輯部, "杭州湖濱銀泰悼念活動遭警力提前部署，以民眾被帶走及清場告終蘋果店前的大廣場，早被特警、保安等人員圍出一片約 50m*70m 的長方形空地，如一張巨大的白紙，禁止民衆進入, 端傳媒," November 26, 2022, https://archive.ph/Smghc
[6] Xueguang Zhou, "Unorganized Interests and Collective Action in Communist China," *American Sociological Review* 58, no. 1 (1993): 54–73.
[7] "Shanghai Says No Lockdown for Now, Tells Bankers to Work at Home," *Bloomberg News*, March 15, 2022, https://archive.ph/fdUwv
[8] "Shanghai Rules Out Full Lockdown Despite Sharp Rise in Covid Cases," Agence France-Presse, March 26, 2022, https://archive.ph/FHqmz
[9] Katsuji Nakazawa, "Analysis: Xi Gives Thumbs-down to Shanghai, Distancing Closest Aide," *Nikkei Asia*, April 14, 2022, https://archive.ph/fZpBC
[10] Daniel Ren, "Coronavirus: Shanghai Adds 19,928 Covid-19 Cases, Setting a Daily Record for the Sixth Day," *South China Morning Post*, April 7, 2022, https://archive.ph/q1Fgj ; Edward White and Eleanor Olcott, "Shanghai Lockdown Tests Xi Jinping's Loyalties in China's Communist Party," *Financial Times*, May 8, 2022, https://archive.ph/CoM62 ;
[11] Leo Sands, "Shanghai: Green Fences Baffle Locked Down Residents," *BBC News*, April 24, 2022, https://archive.ph/DNjE9 ; Tracy Wen Liu, "Shanghai's Food Shortages Spur Voluntarism and Cynicism," *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2022, https://archive.ph/kRGYk
[12] Xinhua, "China Will Surely Win Anti-COVID War in Shanghai, With Time-tested Epidemic Control Policy: Top Leadership," *Qiushi*, May 6, 2022, https://archive.ph/dJWKn
[13] "李强：我们打赢了大上海保卫战," CCTV, June 25, 2022, https://archive.ph/Rn9x7
[14] Kathleen Magramo, "Anger at China's Zero-Covid Policy Is Rising, But Beijing Refuses to Change Course," CNN, October 13, 2022, https://archive.ph/eUosZ

[15] Yu Xi, "Chinese Universities Implement Classified Closed-loop Measures Amid Flare-ups," *Global Times*, September13, 2022, https://archive.ph/CP9wD ; "China's Shenzhen Orders Big Firms Such as FoxConn into Closed Loop to Curb COVID," Reuters, July 25, 2022, https://archive.ph/bX9al

[16] Huizhong Wu, "China Quarantine Bus Crash Prompts Outcry over 'Zero COVID,'" Associated Press, September 20, 2022, https://archive.ph/nyLK0 ; 华鲁泰, "贵州大巴车侧翻事件，绝不是什么简单的交通事故," September 18, 2022, https://archive.ph/OFX22

[17] Joy Dong and Vivian Wang, "3-Year-Old in China Dies After Covid Restrictions Delayed Care," *New York Times*, November 4,2022, https://archive.ph/wiOij

[18] Christian Shepherd, "Tragic Tales Emerge from China's Locked-down Xian," *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2022, https://archive.ph/dlBPz

[19] Tong Jingrong. "The Formation of an Agonistic Public Sphere: Emotions, the Internet and News Media in China," *China Information* 29, no. 3 (2015): 333–51.

[20] Helen Davidson, "'We All Saw It': Anti-Xi Jinping Protest Electrifies Chinese Internet," *The Guardian*, October 14, 2022, https://archive.ph/MZXKo

[21] Li Yuan, "A Lonely Protest in Beijing Inspires Young Chinese to Find Their Voice," *New York Times*, October 24, 2022, https://archive.ph/uK8Ft ; "中國爆「廁所革命」　清華嚴管打印店," 自由亚洲电台[RFA], October 18, 2022, https://archive.is/iYzJU

[22] AFP, "Apple Limits AirDrop on iPhones in China After Filesharing Feature Was Used by Protesters," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2022, https://archive.ph/BM85I ; "中國爆「廁所革命」　清華嚴管打印店," 自由亚洲电台[RFA], October 18, 2022, https://archive.is/iYzJU

[23] "高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜 为全面建设社会主义现代化国家而团结奋斗—: 习近平同志代表第十九届中央委员会向大会作的报告摘登," 人民日报, October 17, 2022, https://archive.ph/ENazb

[24] Sam Hancock, "Apple: Chinese Workers Flee Covid Lockdown at iPhone Factory," *BBC News*, October 30, 2022, https://archive.ph/iTgHu ; "iPhone Factory Worker Walked 25 Miles to Escape Covid Lockdown in China," *Bloomberg News*, October 31, 2022, https://archive.ph/TEC7F

[25] Keith Zhai and Yang Jie, "Letter from Apple Supplier Foxconn's Founder Prodded China to Ease Zero-Covid Rules," *Wall Street Journal*, December 8, 2022, https://archive.ph/DWcd3

[26] "长期新冠"后遗症？专家：多数是短暂的，症状轻微," November 4, 2022, https://archive.ph/DQwNj

[27] "国务院联防联控机制公布进一步优化疫情防控的二十条措施," November 11, 2022, https://archive.ph/lHuEM

[28] 周人杰, "要有'时时放心不下'的责任感,"人民日报, July 26, 2022, https://archive.ph/3jgn5

[29] 仲音 " '动态清零 ' 可持续而且必须坚持," 人民日报, October 11, 2022, https://archive.ph/kFFYi ; "Shanghai's Neighborhood Covid Enforcers Keep Lockdowns Going Even as Cases Drop," *Bloomberg News*, May 23, 2022, https://archive.ph/ZnyeO

[30] "Fear and Panic Grips Chinese City said to Exiting COVID Zero," *Bloomberg News*, November 16, 2022, https://archive.ph/QlIAA

[31] "优化调整新冠疫情防控措施不是放开、躺平," 中国青年报, November 15, 2022, https://archive.ph/yZQ14

[32] "专家解读优化疫情防控'二十条'：不是'躺平,'是寻求更大整体利益," 环球, November 11, 2022, https://archive.ph/YgVqS

[33] "「十問」衛健委質疑如何清零　微信用戶被刪文封帳號," 明報, November 23, 2023, https://archive.ph/BLDxf
[34] Cindy Carter, "'Ten Questions' Not to Ask About Pandemic Policy," *China Digital Times*, November 23, 2022, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/11/translation-ten-questions-not-to-ask-about-pandemic-policy/ ; "从山崖下的 27 条人命，到深夜火光中的 10 个人"（外二篇）" December 1, 2023, https://archive.ph/HkYIA
[35] "十问卫建委 质疑政府防疫无方引起轰动," RFI, November 24, 2022, https://archive.ph/RnNey
[36] Oliver Holmes, "China Censors Maskless Crowd Footage in World Cup Broadcasts," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2022, https://archive.ph/nxj7Q
[37] Associated Press, "China Expands Lockdowns as COVID-19 Cases Hit Daily Record," NPR, November 24, 2022, https://archive.ph/ijcHl
[38] "如何用法律武器阻止违规封控," Sina.com, November 27, 2022, https://archive.ph/H4jOC
[39] "拒絕防疫政策，火災後的烏魯木齊及多地民衆上街抗議封控," 端傳媒, November 25, 2022, https://archive.ph/JUKL4
[40] "Deadly Xinjiang Blaze Prompts Anger at Covid Zero Policy," *Bloomberg News*, November 25, 2022, https://archive.ph/OvKab
[41] Chang Che and Amy Chang Chien, "Protest in Xinjiang Against Lockdown After Fire Kills 10," *New York Times*, November 25, 2022, https://archive.ph/g1anK
[42] 冯华妹, "乌鲁木齐高层住宅楼失火致 10 死 9 伤 官方表示楼栋未封闭,"财新, November 27, 2022, https://archive.ph/VVjt9
[43] "乌鲁木齐大火后 中国多所大学传声援与抗议活动," 自由亚洲电台[RFA], November 26, 2022, https://archive.ph/ucelU ; Billy Perrigo, "Why a Blank Sheet of Paper Became a Protest Symbol in China," *Time*, December 1, 2022, https://archive.ph/WU9vN
[44] "南京传媒学院学生聚集点亮灯光，高喊：'人民万岁！逝者安息！'" 中国数字时代, November 26, 2022, https://archive.ph/9DRPG ; Martin Quin Pollard and Brenda Goh, "Blank Sheets of Paper Become Symbol of Defiance in China Protests," Reuters, November 28, 2022, https://archive.ph/UK0sE ; Chris Buckley and Muyi Xiao, "Protests Erupt in Shanghai and Other Chinese Cities Over Covid Controls," *New York Times*, November 26, 2022, https://archive.ph/o2wIi ; Leta Hong Fincher, "Women Led the Largest Protests in China in Decades," *Bazaar*, December 14, 2022, https://archive.ph/ENR2K
[45] Chris Buckley and Muyi Xiao, "Protests Erupt in Shanghai and Other Chinese Cities Over Covid Controls," *New York Times*, November 26, 2022, https://archive.ph/o2wIi
[46] Vivian Wang, "A Protest? A Vigil? In Beijing, Anxious Crowds Are Unsure How Far to Go," *New York Times*, November 28, 2022, https://archive.ph/K4Xd8
[47] Pollard and Goh, "Blank Sheets of Paper Become Symbol of Defiance in China Protests."
[48] Chang Che and Amy Chang Chien, "Memes, Puns and Blank Sheets of Paper: China's Creative Acts of Protest," *New York Times*, November 28, 2022, https://archive.ph/pBtym
[49] @EvenPay, November 27, 2022, https://archive.ph/kadgM
[50] Brian Fung, "Twitter Searches for China Protests Bombarded by Spam and Porn, Raising Alarms Among Researchers," CNN.com, November 28, 2022, https://archive.ph/YcQNY
[51] 周昱君, "假帳號狂發色情廣告淹沒推特降低「白紙革命」曝光度," 上報, November 29, 2022, https://archive.ph/23XGu
[52] Cindy Carter, "Minitrue: Three Leaked Censorship Directives Target Anti-Lockdown Protests and Censorship-Circumvention Tools," 中国数字时代, November 29, 2022, https://archive.ph/Fe5eL
[53] "China Threatens Crackdown on 'Hostile Forces' as COVID Protests Continue," Associated Press, November 29, 2022, https://archive.ph/jg6q6

[54] Nectar Gan and Yong Xiong, "Chinese Police Are Using Cellphone Data to Track Down Protesters," CNN.com, December 2, 2022, https://archive.ph/f1JgV ; Paul Mozur, Claire Fu, and Amy Chang Chien, "How China's Police Used Phones and Faces to Track Protesters," *New York Times*, December 4, 2022, https://archive.ph/k9oxK

[55] Finbarr Bermingham, "Chinese President Xi Jinping Believes 'Frustrated Students' Are Behind Covid-19 Protests, EU Officials Say," *South China Morning Post*, December 2, 2022, https://archive.ph/EWFis ; 周昱君, "習近平透露有意鬆綁防控　北京、深圳、廣州現放寬管制跡象," 上报, December 3, 2022, https://archive.ph/gTXb5

[56] 中华人民共和国国家卫生健康委员会, "关于进一步优化落实新冠肺炎疫情防控措施的通知," December 7, 2022, https://archive.ph/jWdRa

[57] Alim, Waluszewski, and Olcott, "'No One Remembers Us.'"

[58] 仲 音, "因时因势，不断优化调整疫情防控政策," 人民日报, December 31, 2022, https://archive.ph/vkJSm

[59] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "2023 New Year Address by President Xi Jinping," December 31, 2022, https://archive.ph/b2BZe

[60] " 新华社, 中国战'疫'进入新阶段: 我国因时因势优化疫情防控措施纪实, " January 8, 2023, https://archive.ph/sAZRB

[61] DW [德国之声], " 防疫大转弯是受白纸运动'影响或被动破防别无选择?" January 10, 2023, https://archive.ph/crYFb

[62] 任仲平, "三年抗疫 我们这样同心走过," 人民网, December 15, 2022, https://archive.ph/0O3RT

[63] 中国数字时代, "躺匪，二十条措施," November 14, 2022, https://archive.ph/GwEvO

[64] 中华人民共和国驻法兰西共和国大使馆, "卢沙野大使与法国外交记者协会交流实录," December 14, 2022, https://archive.ph/ymI9d

[65] 左玥, "为什么白纸抗议是"三个运动"？理解封控抗议潮的革命性和局限性," Matters, January 3, 2023, https://archive.ph/2RO1g

[66] Feng Chen and Yi Kang, "Disorganized Popular Contention and Local Institutional Building in China: A Case Study in Guangdong," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (April 2016): 596–612, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1132959

[67] Helen Davidson, "Chinese Woman Says She Is Detained in Secret Location After Beijing Protest," *The Guardian*, January 17, 2023, https://archive.ph/8iy7E

[68] Vivian Wang and Zixu Wang, "In China's Crackdown on Protesters, a Familiar Effort to Blame Foreign Powers," *New York Times*, January 26, 2023, https://archive.ph/9Jby2

[69] Shen Lu and Li Yanqi, "In China, Young Women Become Accidental Symbols of Defiance," *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2023, https://archive.ph/JaUM0

[70] Brian Spegele, "Beijing Court Rejects High-Profile #MeToo Appeal Amid Heavy Police Presence," *Wall Street Journal*, August 22, 2022, https://archive.ph/JvftM ; Shen Lu and Li Yanqi, "In China, Young Women Become Accidental Symbols of Defiance," *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2023, https://archive.ph/JaUM0

[71] Kayla Wang and Lean Jinghui, "'Courage needs to be honed': Protesters on why they stand against China's zero-Covid policy despite risk of arrest," *Mothership*, December 3, 2022, https://archive.ph/bkip4 ; Shin Kawashima, "China: Exploiting the 'White Paper Protests' to Revoke the Zero-COVID Policy," *The Diplomat*, January 30, 2023, https://archive.is/Leegc