

What next for China's politicised youth?

Monday 27 February 2023, by [China Deviants](#), [Lausan Collective](#) (Date first published: 19 January 2023).

An interview with China Deviants

Lausan Collective: Tell us about China Deviants.

China Deviants: The Chinese Communist Party's long oppression of the Chinese people reached a breaking point in November, motivating Chinese people in China and abroad to stand together against the regime. However, decades of oppressive rule and depoliticisation has resulted in the atomisation of Chinese society, preventing meaningful mass mobilisation and organisation. China Deviants aims to be an offline platform where Chinese activists can come together, build trust and sustain a collective campaign of resistance against the CCP. We want China Deviants to be a place where the oppressed and marginalised have a voice, free from the regime's censorship.

We are unequivocally opposed to totalitarian rule and the CCP's regime of systemic oppression. We will fight for democratisation in China and its periphery. In a country like China, those who overtly resist the regime bear significant personal risk. However, democracy and rule of law in China can only be achieved if we truly dedicate ourselves to the struggle. When Peng Zaizhou raised his banner on Sitong Bridge, even he may not have imagined the extent to which his actions reverberated throughout China, the Chinese diaspora and the world.

We are currently working to build organisational bonds among overseas Chinese. At the same time, we are working to form connections with those on the other side of the "wall" [in mainland China] in preparation for the next great upheaval. What we must do is to lay the groundwork to nurture the potential for revolution when the upheaval occurs.

There have never been any saviours or messiahs. We must be our own rescuers, and fight for hope in our own future.

LS: What motivated you to form China Deviants?

CD: From our personal experience, there are many people around us with interesting theories and opinions, but we lack the space to put these into practice and work together. The reason for forming China Deviants was simple: to use the opportunity to cut our teeth. In addition, we wanted to work with people who are brave and have different points of view.

China Deviants first began as a result of the Beijing Sitong Bridge protest—it made us feel that we could not stand idly by doing nothing. The attendance of so many protesters at the Trafalgar Square demonstration in London [on October 29, 2022] made us more confident, but also showed us that there was no group organising mainland Chinese people. This is what led us to found China Deviants—our aim is to mobilise people and combat atomisation.

LS: Is your membership mainly composed of Chinese international students? How do you organise and reach out to each other?

CD: Yes, we are mainly mainland Chinese students and recent graduates. We use secure online platforms to organise, and also have regular discussions in person. We have formed friendships through talking on social media and organising together.

Most of us first encountered each other at offline activities like protests and demonstrations. Some of us created an online Telegram group, and some people from the group began meeting together in person. As we met together more frequently in real life, we grew to know one another as more than just our screen names.

LS: What were some reactions to the Sitong Bridge protest within your collective?

CD: The Sitong Bridge protest was the catalyst for long-repressed emotions to erupt into direct action. There were many people who were dissatisfied with the regime's arbitrary and irrational governance, and frustrated by the prospect that this would remain the case for the foreseeable future. There were those who were further dissatisfied with the complete incapacity for self-reflection and accountability on the part of the regime's rulers and bureaucrats. Then there were those who felt depressed by the oppressive living conditions in the mainland. All these people were inspired by the Sitong Bridge protest to manifest their discontent in real life, coming out to put up posters and find one another.

If, as the saying goes, history is the accumulation of rebellious ideas, the Sitong Bridge protest is the match that lit the flame of rebellion.

There are those who continue to passively express their discontent through *tangping* [1] and *bailan* [2], but by what I've seen around me those who *tangping* can't quite *tangping* and those who *bailan* can't quite *bailan* anymore. There are people who actually choose to stand up.

As long as there is grief in China, my friends and I will continue our work, even if it takes a lifetime or several lifetimes.

LS: How have the last couple of years since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the political development of China Deviant members?

CD: I think people's perspectives—whether to do with politics or other subjects—are rooted in their life experiences. Although we may collaborate and engage collectively in different actions, we all have our own reasons for doing so, and our own aspirations and visions of how we think things should be. I think, if we are to accept that our organisation will ultimately be a composite of people's different influences, then what we need to do is figure out a way of consolidating our collective power into broader, more powerful value statements. Whereas before we were individually expressing our views and digesting different issues, the existence of our organisation allows people to understand that solidarity and consensus is a more practical way of realising our ambitions.

LS: Since the "White Paper Revolution", what do you think mainland Chinese international students abroad can do to make their voice heard?

CD: Personally, my goal is to connect with more people through political struggle while maintaining my personal safety.

The protesters in 1989 were too quick to martyr themselves. This led China's political development to lose a large portion of dedicated working-class activists. Many people have died, many more continue to live in a state of fear, and others have been politically persecuted and stripped of the ability to participate in civic society. This is the most important lesson that this generation has bestowed upon us: in order to pave the way for a better society and politics, the most important unit

of the equation is the person. Thus, we must treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated—to protect each another’s safety, because this is the way of protecting the future.

At the same time, it is important to protect these connections between individuals, to get to know one another’s viewpoints—to comfort one another, to share our perspectives, and not let ourselves be trapped by doubt and suspicion. Those who we have previously thought of as enemies may, in some circumstances, be interlocutors—of course, while making sure to keep ourselves safe.

It is important for those in China to be able to communicate with overseas friends safely and securely, to explore and learn about what is happening in different places.

The problems faced by China will one day come to a head. At the same time, those bureaucrats and rulers that will be our future opponents will possess even greater knowledge and experience of how to maintain their rule. We’ll have to wait for the right opportunity to act.

LS: What are some views amongst Chinese international students about the various self-determination struggles that are ongoing in China’s peripheral regions? Do you see any opportunities for solidarity between these struggles and that of mainland Chinese people?

CD: Because we still haven’t done a public opinion survey of Chinese international students, we don’t have enough information to generalise what they think. But as far as we are concerned, identification with the nationalistic sentiment that the regime promotes through their propaganda—notions like *huaxia* [3], Chinese unification with Taiwan and Xi Jinping’s “Great Cause” of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics—is slowly fading. Each person’s political journey will be different, though.

In relation to Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan, these aren’t faraway lands but real places with which ordinary Chinese people frequently interact in their daily lives. Seeing the people of these regions as real, flesh and blood people who equally deserve the right to live a fulfilling life—this kind of understanding, which defies the regime’s attempts to dehumanise them through propaganda, has led us to abandon the crude and fantastical notion of Chinese “unification” and “solidarity”. This kind of rhetoric thrown around by the regime are just disingenuous slogans they use to string along the Chinese people, and fewer and fewer people actually see these slogans as representative of reality.

It is not only the Chinese people, but people all across the world who need to reckon with the ideological domination of the framework of sovereign statehood and nationalism over our political imagination. We will reserve our judgement on those who operate on the same nationalist and statist logic as the Chinese Communist Party.

Still, we’re not willing to draw a line between ourselves and those who have differing views on how to resolve the problems in China and its peripheral regions. These disagreements should be openly and honestly negotiated by all when a democratic framework and process exists. The problem now is not that we have disagreements, but that we don’t have a framework and platform for discussion because of the decades of repression, depoliticisation and social atomisation engineered by the CCP to maintain their rule. We must create a space for free and democratic discussion and decision-making to exist.

LS: What role (at home or abroad) do you think mainland Chinese students can play in relation to the various civil rights struggles in mainland China?

CD: I think what we can do best is to increase the masses’ political consciousness and capacity for

critical thought, but ultimately, what's important is for marginalised sectors of society like migrant workers, factory workers and the LGBTQ+ community to voice their own demands themselves. The role we can play is to be a channel that broadcasts perspectives about China, from China, that have been banned and ignored. As our work progresses, Chinese students at home and abroad can expect us to provide a channel that bridges the flow of rebellious ideas from both sides of the "wall". All of us genuinely wish for change that allows people to live the life they want: to be able to live and speak freely without discrimination.

LS: What are some of your current campaigns, and are there any longer-term goals you want to share?

CD: We are a decentralised organisation, and all our members participate voluntarily in our work. This includes organising in-person meetings, workshops and protests, producing and publicising political literature, maintaining and broadening our network of activists and allies and promoting cooperation between the different struggles in China. You can take a look at our [Instagram page](#) to learn more about our work and our organisational principles.

LS: What do you think about the CCP's abrupt lifting of COVID restrictions in the wake of the "White Paper Revolution"? Has it changed China Deviants' analysis of the political environment in China? Has it changed your goals?

CD: The CCP's policy U-turn to some extent came as a surprise, as within a fortnight most of the restrictions that had dominated the entire country for almost three years were completely dismantled. The virus which had previously been touted as highly dangerous suddenly became one comparable in severity to the common cold. Yet, such a policy change is by no means unforeseeable, given that the disruptions caused by the restrictions have already made the economic outlook extremely gloomy.

It is beyond doubt that the CCP's new policy of "coexisting with COVID" is a complete failure, with the rate of daily infections and COVID deaths soaring. The tragic scenes of hospital wards overflowing with patients and overwhelmed emergency rooms proved again that the regime simply does not attach any importance to people's lives or livelihoods, with their only priority being the maintenance of their control over society. Unfortunately, by fabricating disinformation and intensifying censorship, the regime began promoting narratives which falsely claimed that the external forces with malicious aims were the masterminds behind the anti-lockdown protests. The government itself is instead portrayed as a benevolent "saviour" of the country, and all the miseries resulting from the policy change are blamed on the protesters.

However, we can say boldly that such attempts will ultimately become futile. The national economy continues to be plagued by chaos and disruption, and the trend of foreign investment pulling out from China remains mostly unreversed. The "White Paper Revolution" has also emboldened the Chinese people and normalised resistance against oppression. [Large-scale protests](#) at a pharmaceutical factory in Chongqing are one such demonstration of the unsubdued determination of workers.

The abrupt change in policy coupled with the oncoming winter might dampen the morale of some members somewhat. But we remain determined and we believe that our resistance is righteous. We quote Petrarch here to express our feelings and emotions:

Virtue against fury shall advance in the fight,
And it i'th' combate soon shall put the fight;

For th' old Roman valor is not dead,
Nor in th' Italian breasts extinguished.

Fundamentally, our goals remain the same since the beginning of the anti-lockdown protests. In the future, we will continue to uphold our anti-totalitarian agenda. In response to the regime's policy reversals, we will apply appropriate modifications to our tactics and strategy. As just one example, we plan on holding a new workshop discussing social movements and contentious politics in a few weeks.

China Deviants is a collective of mainland Chinese international student activists that formed in November 2022. Peng Zaizhou's protest at Sitong Bridge and the "White Paper Revolution" has resulted in mass mobilisation in China and in Chinese diaspora communities against the Chinese regime on a scale not seen for decades. While factory workers and urban residents in China have been at the forefront of mass protests against the government's now-cancelled adaptation of "zero-COVID" policy, university students have also played a key role in calling not only for the lifting of overly-harsh pandemic control restrictions but also—echoing Peng Zaizhou's demands—for democracy, freedom of speech, the rule of law, and government accountability to the people.

The politics of China Deviants, as with others in this new generation of democracy activists, are still developing and will doubtless be in flux as the movement grows. Though we cannot predict the course of the movement's development, we hope to see a space for a new Chinese left to flourish in it. With that in mind, we find it important to spotlight the voices of these Chinese organizers—often misconstrued, ignored, or silenced in general—as one of many grassroots perspectives in this latest wave of struggle. Speaking with this collective emphasised for us the need to stay in touch with the rapid and constantly changing politicisation of Chinese youth, especially as it pertains to the development of an inchoate Chinese democracy movement after decades of authoritarian repression, depoliticisation and social atomisation. We also wish to platform the perspectives and experiences of this new generation of Chinese activists, and to facilitate the kind of cross-community sharing and discussion of experiences and ideas identified by China Deviants as crucial to the development of a grassroots movement for democracy and self-determination in China, its diasporas, and its peripheries.

Lausan Collective

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Lausan Collective

<https://lausancollective.com/2023/chinas-politicised-youth/>

Footnotes

[1] 躺平, meaning "lie flat", is a form of lifestyle and social resistance by young Chinese people against overwork and the crushing pressure of societal expectations. Those who "lie flat" eschew

the ethos of intense competition and hard work which no longer promises life satisfaction or financial success.

[2] 躺平, meaning “let it rot”, is to embrace and actively exacerbate an already deteriorating situation. This term is used by Chinese netizens to describe giving up on the “rat race” altogether in favour of laziness and self-indulgence.

[3] 中华民族, a term referring generally to Han Chinese civilisation, is a concept repurposed by the Chinese Communist Party to promote a unified Chinese national identity that entails the Sinification of China’s ethnic minorities, especially in Xinjiang, and their subsumption into a singular Chinese nation defined by Han Chinese language and culture.