

China: Blank Sheets of Paper

Thursday 1 December 2022, by [ASH Alec](#) (Date first published: 30 November 2022).

In March 2020, after a panicked six weeks of chaos while Covid-19 spread in Wuhan and out, life in China returned to almost normal just as the rest of the world went into lockdown. By that summer, an image of thousands of swimmers without facemasks crowded in a Wuhan public pool became a symbol of Beijing's success in 'the people's war against the virus'. I lived in a rural valley through it all, near Dali, without the need for a single Covid test or quarantine or lockdown. They were becoming more common in the cities, but there was still a popular sense that China had got it right.

In 2022, something changed. Much of the rest of the world, protected by mRNA vaccines, was emerging into the sunlight while China was still trapped in the dark. The two-month [Shanghai lockdown](#) in the spring shocked residents out of their smugness; one out-of-work restaurateur I met said he lost 20kg (down to 49kg by the end) for want of enough to eat. Covid tests were required every three days in Beijing. Residents' movements were controlled by a health-tracking app: a green code allowed free passage; an orange or red code meant lockdown at home, transfer to a quarantine centre or another month unable to earn. The national 'dynamic zero' Covid policy was zealously implemented at a local level. People were fed up.

Last weekend, something snapped. People had waited until after Xi's coronation at October's Party Congress. They had witnessed a flirtation with looser restrictions in test cities such as Shijiazhuang, only for lockdown to be enforced again. And they had followed horror stories of the human cost of zero Covid, from the quarantine bus crash that killed 27 to the needless death of a three-year-old boy in Lanzhou whose medical care was delayed by lockdown restrictions. A fire in a locked-down apartment block in Urumqi last Thursday killed ten people. Street protests hit Urumqi on Friday, Shanghai on Saturday and Beijing on Sunday, along with sixteen other cities.

The marchers have been carrying blank A4 sheets of paper, which 'represent everything we want to say but cannot say,' in the words of one demonstrator. It was adopted as a form of protest in Hong Kong in 2020, and has now been picked up in the mainland. (On the Chinese web, searches for 'A4' and 'white paper' have been censored, as well as 'Urumqi' and 'Shanghai'; domestic doom-scrollers are upsizing to the codeword 'A3'.)

A flood of videos has breached the censorship dam, not only on [Chinese-language Twitter](#) but on my WeChat newsfeed too, among the selfies and food pics. The posts are generally gone within ten minutes. On Little Red Book (an app similar to Instagram) there are calls for 'Banana Peel' (xiangjiaopi, no prizes for guessing who's meant) to resign. STEM students at Tsinghua university have held up signs with the Friedmann equations that describe the expansion of space (a pun on 'freed man' and an oblique reference to opening up). One woman in Zhejiang marched in chains with duct tape over her mouth, blank sheet of paper held high.

It is hard to overstate how unusual all of this is. Street protests are not uncommon in China, with hundreds of 'mass incidents', in the official euphemism, every year. Yet they tend to have a local focus: against cadre corruption, land-grabs or pollution. Now, for the first time since 1989, there is a nationwide expression of discontent with the government in Beijing. None of the demonstrations has

reached anything near the numbers in Tiananmen Square 33 years ago, and they are already fizzling out as the police state kicks into gear. Yet if public protest at national policy is relatively ordinary in the West (as it was in Hong Kong before 2020), I have never seen anything like this in twelve years of living in China.

'Xi Jinping, step down!' crowds shouted on Urumqi Road in Shanghai on Saturday. 'Communist Party, step down!' Such a slogan was unthinkable until it was uttered. There may be some safety in numbers for the people chanting it, although many will no doubt be identified from videos (police are checking phones on the subways and streets, deleting photos and videos of the protests). In an online voice-chat forum of Chinese citizens on Sunday, a 26-year-old from Wenzhou vented even more boldly: 'In 33 years the Chinese people haven't spoken up, now we can say fuck you Xi Jinping, fuck your mother's cunt.'

The protests were peaceful. Crowds commemorated the dead in Urumqi, declared solidarity ('I love you Beijing!'), took off their masks. In Dali, a score of guitar-wielding slackers ambled through the city singing the Chinese lyrics of the 'Internationale'. A group of Peking University students, who had protested silently with blank signs on Sunday, released a letter on Monday with a list of demands, including abolition of the health code system, an end to mandatory Covid tests and the lifting of censorship.

The sites of protest have now been overrun with police and the Chinese internet has been scrubbed clean of their digital record. As Rana Mitter put it, 'state capacity to coerce is much stronger than 1989 and it seems unlikely that we will see a repeat of what happened that year.' Yet the larger story, behind the headline of protests, is a quieter civil disobedience that is ongoing: a public throwing up of the arms, or at least roll of the eyes, when it comes to the Covid security state. Health codes are unscanned, tests skipped, residential authority figures challenged. Passive protest is almost as powerful as active: if paper cannot carry a slogan, it will not be written on at all.

I was in Beijing for the fortnight after the Party Congress last month. The vibrant city I had moved to in 2008 was unrecognisable. 'It's more or less North Korea,' one bar owner said. That Xi Jinping was being anointed for a precedent-breaking third term did not help. Even some of his base had lost faith. I talked to a professor at Peking University, Pan Wei, who had supported the state through it all but now questioned zero Covid and Xi's priorities: 'I don't understand this policy, it is hurting the economy and people's livelihoods.' For the first time in decades, a mass of people felt the central Party was not acting in their best interests.

There are, of course, the other half of the population who disagree. Xi's popularity among the working class, combined with an abiding fear of Covid, means there is as much support for pandemic measures as resistance to them. Those who work in the *weiwen tizhi* or 'stability maintenance system', including health workers and local security guards, are generally true believers. And for the majority who have not been directly affected by lockdowns, there is little solidarity for those who have. Pride in zero Covid, for many, still outweighs its inconveniences.

Yet the civil unrest, though targeted at health policy, is about more than Covid. 'In fact I think it's showing dissatisfaction with the whole system,' a programmer in Beijing told me. 'I think China's management is like Nazi Germany ... What's the use of dialogue with thugs?' He didn't join the peaceful gathering by the Liangma river, instead advocating violent protest, though I got the impression he was letting off steam. He referred to Lu Xun's allegory of an iron house where the inhabitants were suffocating in their sleep. 'At least now many sleepers have awakened.'

For now, social stability has been reasserted; the iron shutters have come down. Even if Beijing can cut the Gordian knot of its zero-Covid policy - a sudden opening could result in hundreds of

thousands of deaths – it is the lack of a plan to reopen, or an end point in sight, that distresses people. For many, in both China and the diaspora, the benefit of the short-lived protests was to show the chinks in the iron house's armour: the people have a voice, and it can be heard, even if they are speaking with a blank sheet of paper.

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London Review of Books

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