

Beyond the White Paper: An Interview on the Social Elite in Shanghai's Protests of November 2022

Friday 12 May 2023, by [Chuang, John \(Shanghai\)](#) (Date first published: 8 April 2023).

In this post we present an interview with a friend who was present at the November 27th protests on Wulumuqi Road in Shanghai. It's important to note that this is not an interview with a Chinese participant in the protest and is certainly not the viewpoint of an "activist" involved in the movement. In this case the interviewee is a foreigner, fluent in Mandarin, who has lived and worked in mainland China for many years. We have therefore given them the pseudonym "John."

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As is evident from the content below, the interviewee participated in the events exclusively as an observer and therefore offers an external view, albeit a first-hand one. The interview took place a few days after the protests, and a few days before the official announcement on December 7th that marked the end of China's Zero-COVID policy. We are releasing it now, one year following the initiation of Shanghai's major lockdown, which, as the interview shows, laid much of the groundwork for the autumn protests. One of the major questions we discuss is why those headline-grabbing protests took place at that time and in that way, when all kinds of protests and direct actions—some of them more confrontational and possibly larger-scale—had already taken place throughout China over the previous year, especially in Shanghai during the lockdown of spring 2022. [\[7\]](#)

At the same time, Ürümchi had also been locked down for a long time. But really, this is just my impression from what I could piece together online.

C: Ok, so putting aside issues of ethnicity or policing, we can be clear from the top that the most important factor is that Ürümchi had been under lockdown for a very long time. So just as if Shanghai was under lockdown in the spring, and thousands of people flooded out onto the street because of a deadly fire, it would be clear that this was an anti-lockdown protest. Right?

J: There was a fire while Shanghai was locked down actually, and I don't think anyone died, but it was pretty viral, with discussion about how this could happen to anybody. Earlier on, there was a lot of stuff about the September earthquake in [Sichuan](#). For example, there were videos circulating from the ground in the middle of tall apartment buildings, and one of the buildings had kind of separated into two columns – it didn't fall over, but there's a gap in the middle, and everyone was freaking out, because it's obviously incredibly unsafe. The area was under lockdown, and there was an actual fight about whether people should get to leave or not. So there is precedent for these kind of disasters.

But Ürümqi had been locked down for 100 days. I had no idea, I think lots of people didn't really have any idea either. I think one thing the propaganda apparatus has done a really good job of is making sure that information about lockdowns, like what cities are locked down, and for how long, is incredibly localized. I feel like a lot of the *weiwen* 维稳 [repressive maintenance of social stability] architecture is about preventing the spread of unstable information across provinces. We thought about this during the Shanghai protests that occurred during our lockdown in the spring. When protests happened, I was messaging with people in other places to ask, "does your Wechat Moments feed show the same stuff?" You could see this with the *Siyue zhi sheng* 四月声 ["Voices of April"] video during lockdown - my whole *pengyouquan* was nothing but that video for 48 hours but there was a real question of whether that was able to leak out into other parts of the country.

Censors were overwhelmed in a similar way in late November. Parallel to the on-the-ground protests on the 25th, 26th and 27th, there was a lot of online sort of anger, and analysis, and posting about it, followed by deletions and censorship. After articles about what happened in Ürümqi were deleted, there was a wave of [ironic online posts](#) that are in article format that contain only the characters *xingxingxing* 星星 ["sure, sure, sure"] or *haohaohao* 好好好 ["fine, fine, fine" repeated hundreds of times]. And the idea is, "well, if this is the only thing you'll let me say, then here you go - but everybody knows what I really wanna say, which is 'fuck you.'" And those were also censored, but not as quickly, because they don't actually have content.

So this is part of what happened as a backdrop to what people have been calling the White Paper Movement. A lot of things are happening simultaneously: One of the slogans that was on someone's paper, for example, was 你们都知道我想说什么 ["You all know what I want to say"], and it's this idea that there is a shared set of ideas that are unsharable, that you can't make public. I think that's developing online and offline in the student protests, but also in these WeChat sharing structures.

In terms of "why now?", this has obviously happened before, and there are plenty of examples, from the Guizhou bus crash carrying people for pandemic control to big public disasters in the past decades, like maybe the earlier disaster of the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, the Wenzhou high speed rail crash in 2011, and others - there has always been censorship aimed at preventing these things from turning into points for protest. In terms of why this is happening now, I think one thing to look at is what people were thinking at the time of the ["Voices of April"] video. This was, from what I've seen, the largest most coordinated online protest, overwhelming censors, and it persisted for a long time. In Shanghai specifically, it was basically just people sending and remixing this video, and it getting taken down, like cat and mouse censorship games. [...]

C: Yes, we did some tests at the time to see whether we, outside Shanghai and elsewhere in China, could see the things you were posting on WeChat in your *pengyouquan* and we had some problems. [8]

J: Yes. I think that the state has done a good job of keeping it relatively unclear. I remember when Ruili [the main border crossing between Yunnan province and Myanmar] was on lockdown, and I felt that there were just droplets of information leaking out, of people saying "save Ruili! We are fucked!" [9] But then there was no further information - it was totally unclear. I think if you went directly to research the information, you could find it, but you would have to know to look for it first. I think it was the same thing with Ürümqi.



Meme in which social media is represented as a mother playing in a pool with happy baby Shanghai while Jilin is distressed and drowning. Ruili is a skeleton resting on the seafloor.

So, 100 days of lockdown, then the fire happens, and there's a rumor that the building was locked. In the lockdown in Shanghai, in a lot of cases, you could still walk out of the building if you wanted to – there were no people physically keeping you in with barriers, and it became an online scandal when some people's doors were physically blocked or welded shut. But with the Ürümchi fire, it was said that not only could the people inside not leave, but that the fire department couldn't get in. But the city government responded that the door was open, and that the people didn't leave. The city government basically blamed the victims, and people got really mad.

There was a [document](#) that came out, perhaps on Friday [November 25th], that the Xinjiang government said “By the way, we have removed all of these places from the list of high-risk areas”, meaning that they can be removed from lockdown. And so lockdown in the city of Ürümchi essentially ended after the protest. I think that's another important piece.

It's unclear how many people around the country put this together at the time, but if you were looking, you could at least say “Wow. They had a riot. And then they weren't locked down anymore. They were locked down for 100 days, and it ended the day after they rioted.”

C: Yes, and the average person knows that, despite what the state might say. The official response will basically never say that they have made some major change in response to a protest, but it does happen all the time and many people know that, if you make a fuss, it will invoke some kind of response. [[10](#)]

J: Yeah. So to recap: there was a major protest in Ürümchi on Friday, the day after the fire. On Saturday afternoon, there were a number of other protests on university campuses, and on Saturday evening in Shanghai there was an attempt by a small number of young people to hold a vigil on Wulumuqi Road.

I get the impression that the vigil was mostly young people, and it started relatively late, maybe around 9pm. A few people brought flowers, and candles, and they had a relatively successful vigil for a couple of hours on this street corner, which I think was Wulumuqi Road and Anfu Road. The police got there relatively quickly and blocked the road — this is unclear, and I wasn't there — but the vigil continued for a long time, until they were dispersed around 3am.

From video I've seen, it seems like it was a quiet vigil at the start, but then at some point people started yelling slogans. At some point, someone yelled “Xi Jinping, *xiatai* [step down]!” and there was a divide in the crowd about how they felt about that. I think some people were definitely there for the memorial, and it wasn't a large number of people. Other people were there just because it

was an event, a happening in the middle of a famous shopping district. This is pretty clear from the [interview](#) on Bumingbai [the “I Don’t Understand” podcast] done with the people who were there the first night.

I don’t have a good sense of how it ended that night. From the interview, it sounds like at around 3 or 4am the police were kind of tired and angry, just pushing people down the road, where they eventually left. I think it was after the police started being more aggressive and surrounding the group that people started chanting, though that too is unclear.

Part three: The second day of protests in Shanghai

J: I wasn’t aware of the vigil and protest until Sunday morning. I think I saw it on Twitter first, actually, but when I looked at my WeChat feed, it was full of protest videos that were surprisingly aggressive. I think at that point it was combination of protest videos, including those with anti-Xi slogans, and explainers formatted as WeChat articles, with titles like “why did this happen last night?” People were posting stuff like “What happened during the Ürümchi fire”, “Remember the Ürümchi fire”, and stuff like that.

I spent all morning looking through this material, and sometime in the afternoon I saw a tweet from a journalist who is in Shanghai that says “people are at Wulumuqi Road again”, sharing a video of a man in a brown coat who was arrested by plainclothes cops while holding flowers. He looked like he was kind of asking for a confrontation with the police, calling the cops idiots and saying they dared not to arrest him.

Video

At the time, I wanted to see what was going on, basically, so I got in touch with a friend and we went down together. The timing isn’t really clear, but we got there a couple hours after that first arrest, which was around 3pm. At that point, we were standing in what felt like a crowd of gawkers looking at the police. Most of the crowd seemed to be wealthy young people, in the middle of a shopping district that would normally have wealthy young people anyway — and quite a few foreigners, talking about going to get burgers later on. It’s Sunday, people are out walking their dogs, and taking their kids around, people are out shopping, some people are carrying name-brand shopping bags. [...] I remember standing next to a couple of young people who were greeting each other like “Oh, hey, how are you? What’s going on here? Were you here last night? Oh yeah, I was here, I saw my friend so and so get stepped on by a cop! The cops stepped on her hand! It was crazy!” The attitude wasn’t like “Fuck the cops!”, it was more like “Whoa, that’s crazy! What the hell? Really?”

At that point the cops had blocked off a north-south two block area, but it was unclear who was there to protest, or if the gathering was anything like a protest at all. A lot of people were there to gawk, and I guess that was true for me, too. By about sunset, I think there were at least four police positions. They were blocking off the top, the north end of Wulumuqi Road, the two entries on Anfu Road, and the next block south on Wulumuqi Rd.



Map of Wulumuqi Road from Christopher Connery's excellent article on the protests and the area's history: "<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2022/12/08/wulumuqi-road/>" Wulumuqi Road>" (Made in China Journal, 8 December 2022)

So we start in the middle. People are just kind of hanging out. So because Wulumuqi Road is a long street running north-south, if you're on a bike or scooter, it's one of the best ways to go north-south through that part of the city, and a lot of delivery guys and people riding home from work on scooters are kind of trying to get through, but a lot of them are also stopping to gawk, because it's interesting. Because they blocked off the north-south road, immediately south of the police blockade on Wulumuqi Road basically becomes a pedestrian street then, and people are just milling about in the empty street.

But more and more people keep coming, mostly on foot. By about 5:30, it felt like somebody decided to basically tests the waters. Up until that point, it was really unclear whether what was happening was a protest, a memorial, or a large group of shoppers and commuters gawking at the police. And so somebody tests the waters and sings the national anthem. Maybe 20-30 people join in, and it sounds pretty bad, but suddenly it's really clear that what's happening is a protest. I think it's interesting that there were a few attempts to have it be a memorial, later on in the night. Some people set up flowers and candles, kind of behind the protest line. Then later on, when we were wandering around, we saw flowers and candles and masks with messages written on them written on the sidewalk. I think there was just one guy setting them up, and then there were cops following him a block behind, just picking them up after him. But I think for most people who were there, it was a protest, and this got more clear as the night went on.



Memorials placed along quiet streets around the protest zone while crowds were being dispersed.

C: Was it at all clear how many people knew what the white paper was at that point, as it had only been around for a few days?

J: That's a good question, and of course I can't say for sure, I think a bunch did, probably a majority but my sense was maybe around 50 percent. At that point, early on, it was a real question to me. I still was in this mode, at that point, wondering "are people here to gawk, or are people here to protest?" And I don't think everyone there knew the answer for themselves at that point.

There were maybe 15-20 people at the front of the police line who were all grouped together, and were clearly there to protest. It's possible that some of them had been there the previous night, or were friends of people who had been there the previous night, were friends of those people that had been arrested.

So a bit after the national anthem, the police started to use a loud speaker, that was absolutely not like the crowd dispersal speakers that they use in Europe or the US or elsewhere, it was like a little hand-held mic. I couldn't even really hear what was said over the crowd, but it was basically saying something like "this is an illegal gathering." Then people started to chant stuff, the first and loudest of which was *fangren* 放人 ["Let them go" or "Release the prisoners"]. This is another reason why I feel like that day's protest was not really just about the people that died in Ürümqi, or at least not mostly about this. To be honest, this felt more like an excuse, or more charitably a sentiment that was on everyone's mind, but not the most pressing issue. The slogans that got the loudest were about arrests and covid policy generally, *fangren* and *jiefeng* 解封 ["End the lockdown(s)"], which is kind of funny because Shanghai was not locked down or anything at the time. To some extent, I think this makes it explicitly political: Release the prisoners and end this covid policy.

After a few more rounds of the national anthem and a less successful attempt at the Internationale and some chanting, people were more or less quietly facing the police line. But at this point, I think it was established that what was going to happen was a protest, essentially — that some large percentage of the 200-300 people who were there are there to protest, or at least don't want to leave if that's what happened. But at the same time, it felt like neither the police nor the protesters were sure about their role, or about what to do next. At this point, my friend and I checked out the edges of the group, figured that if the police tried to set up a kettle, they'd fail, and we could get out: At the beginning, the police were only holding the entry to Wulumuqi Road, but not holding the intersection at all, and there was no sign of reinforcements coming from behind the protest group.

During this whole time, there's one individual traffic cop who's just inside with the protesters, and helping cars get through. This was true throughout the protest, that there were cops in the same space as the protesters and apart from police lines, not threatening the protestors or being threatened by them. Most were traffic cops, and so they were from a different unit or department than those sent to respond to the gathering. I think they were there just doing their job, and probably didn't even know the other team.

After about 30 minutes, a new group of cops does make it around from the south, and the cops finally took the whole intersection. At this point the mood changes, and more people start figuring out how to get away from the new police lines. At the same time, the crowd gets split in half, as half of the people go west and the other half go east. Over the course of that 45 minutes, a large group of protesters was pushed one block east on the narrow road toward Changshu Road, a much wider street. There also happens to be a subway stop right there, which was closed down at some point. I

didn't know that until later, when I saw pictures of handwritten signs written over the locked doors declaring that the station was "temporarily closed."

It took a long time for the police to move down the street — there weren't physical confrontations at this point, but people in the crowd kept leading chants, and over the course of that one-block push, the feeling solidified that, "Oh, we are protesters, and they are cops". There was one event that I think solidified this in particular — as the crowd is moving away from the police line, facing them and filming, a man stops short, turns around to face the crowd with his back to the police, and yells something that ends with "Xi Jinping, *xiatai!*" before being swallowed up by the cops. It felt like a sacrifice: He could have been in the middle of the crowd and yelled that, but he didn't, and that was the first time I heard that kind of slogan on that night. It might have been yelled earlier, but I didn't hear it. After he got taken away, that did energize people. It was the first visible arrest of that moment. Honestly, it felt like he had sacrificed himself in this really intense way. I think a lot of people saw this, and respected him. Then, later on, as they were marching down, you did hear more aggressive, more political chants, including some of the slogans from the [Sitong Bridge banner](#). People came up with new chants later, like "□□□□□□□□□□" ["No more covid test codes, no more location [codes](#)"]. Another one I heard was "□□□□□□□□□□" ["Let the people speak, the sky won't fall"], which is a [quotation](#) from Mao Zedong, along with a few other chants related to free speech.

C: It seems like there was an interesting mix of chants. Some, as you say, come straight from Mao, while some come from the Sitong Bridge banners, and then there were some slogans that showed up on signs in other protests that sounded like innocuous liberal platitudes about free speech, that could have come out of a speech by Nancy Pelosi or something. What do you think? Any more examples come to mind?

J: There was one incident where three guys showed up, they were standing around the outside of the protest at a pretty quiet moment. One says "Wow, that was crazy", and another one goes to the front and yells "We want a real constitution!" and people cheer, and then another runs to the front and says "□□□□□□" ["We want a society governed by the rule of law"], or whatever, followed by cheers. I think there were other chants yelling "□□□□" ["freedom of speech"] and other things that are in the [Chinese] constitution.

There were a few more active people in the protest, who were there to protest in the beginning. I think they were the ones who were leading a lot of chants, including chants that were directly coming from the bridge banner: □□□□□□□□□□□□□□ ["We want food not covid tests, we want freedom not lockdowns"], etc. There's a string of phrases there, and the last one is □□□□□□□□ ["Impeach the treasonous dictator Xi Jinping"]. In my memory, it was mostly a woman leading the chants, but each time they get to the end and she says something like □□□□□□ ["We don't want the dictator Xi Jinping"], everybody starts cheering and clapping without repeating it, as if either it's the end of the chant, or as if they support it. Whatever the case, the 150 people or so that are being pushed down the street are like "I'm not repeating that... maybe I believe it, but I'm not repeating it".

After the police pushed the group to the end of the street, people continued to chant slogans and stand around. Honestly, it got boring, but people keep coming, entering and leaving the crowd relatively freely. People walking by would also just join in. By this time it's maybe 6:30 or 7pm. People are walking by and asking what was going on. Delivery riders are having to think whether they can make it through the police line to do their pick up. At one point, there's a delivery driver who actually drives his bike in between the cops and the protesters, and stands up on his bike, and starts yelling some shit, and he's actually really funny. He's basically doing stand-up bits, but the people next to me were talking about how he must be a plant, sent to defuse the situation. But I think this was just one of those bizarre moments, and he was just a funny dude who was just taking the opportunity to like, do some stand up, and just leaves.



Photo from Shanghai protests of delivery worker pushing through the crowd, saying "Let me by everybody, my order's gonna be late!" This circulated among observers commenting that this illustrated bourgeois character of these particular protests, or how alienated some workers were by what was going on.

After the crowd got divided, the whole area around Wulumuqi Road was blocked off on all sides, and we could tell from our phone map programs that there were roadblocks being put up, so we thought we would go take a look at the other road blocks, and went to check out another intersection. When we got there, there was bigger crowd, but nobody was chanting slogans, and the crowd was more spread out. There was a bus directly behind the police lines, and we were pretty sure the police were preparing these rental busses to take everyone away for mass arrests. That was also the first time that we saw the police start to be really aggressive, around perhaps 7:30/8:00pm.

Comment page on a roadblock - 266 people online, comments saying "Take a picture if you're close by", "A limitless horizon to the front, a limitless horizon to the back," "Reason for the traffic jam is unclear" and "Let's go guys".

Screenshot showing road closures on a mapping app.

There were some slogans chanted, but things also got a bit chaotic. The protest was spilling over around the several different streets that converge in the area. We got there right as the cops were trying to take an intersection, with support from private security guards who seemed to have just shown up.

The scene was a bit chaotic, though. A woman in her 30s or 40s on a scooter was yelling at the protesters, wanting them to leave. There was an old woman hanging around the edges of the group muttering under her breath that there is definitely a covid case in this crowd, and everyone should start to go home. At some point we saw a squad of police, organized as a snatch squad, grab someone pretty close to us, so we decided to leave and check out other intersections.

On the west side of the road, one intersection had been cleared, with only a few cops guarding it and small groups of young people walking around in twos or threes, but at another intersection further up we ran into a crowd of people who were being pushed down the road. The police were using more intense tactics at this time, and shining lights at the crowd to blind cellphones, I think.

Earlier, police pushes were slowed down by delivery drivers trying to go down the road — a driver would move through the crowd, hit the police line, and the cops would have to stop to argue with the driver, and get them to turn back, before they could continue to advance. This time, they had a smarter strategy where they had two cops ahead of the line, walking along with the protesters, who

handled the delivery drivers while the main group made sure that the whole crowd moved on.

At this point, I got airdropped videos from a group of 3-4 young, fashionable kids — one of them came up to me and says, “hey, they’re making arrests, be careful,” and airdrops me a video of police jumping on someone. I looked at the person’s screen and they were also air dropping it to maybe 50 other random iPhones. At that point, I figured there might be some sort of underground sharing going on in the crowd, but I wasn’t clued into it. [\[11\]](#)

The whole time, there were a lot of people with cameras, too — not just mobile phones. Point and shoot cameras, mainly, and mini-DV cameras, but not big DSLRs. It wasn’t clear whether people were being really smart about security by not bringing their phone, or if they just thought it was going to be an event worth filming.

The police pushed this crowd down the street for an hour or so as well. This time, they had squads of security guards ahead of the police line, and they were the ones that were being more aggressive, saying “get the fuck out of here! Go home, what are you doing here, go home!” Once the crowd was pushed to another intersection, they split the crowd again. At this point, the police had enough people and momentum pushed down three streets simultaneously, and could occupy the intersection and push out in any direction. At that point we left the protest entirely, but as we were walking away, we saw maybe 20 black SWAT vans driving toward the area we had just left.

C: How did you feel about the protest in Shanghai, versus what you saw about the protests in Beijing, Xi’an or other locations?

J: I think Beijing and Shanghai were quite different from what happened in some other cities such as Wuhan. I think the Beijing and Shanghai protests were in a way linked up, and I think it was the same demographic as well. There were a lot of bystanders who were interested and just got roped in, but I think a lot of the people who showed up were very online, highly media-literate, highly literate in general. Probably a lot of people there had VPNs, I think 100 percent of the main slogan leaders were people who probably had VPNs — not like I asked anybody, but there were conversations I heard in the crowd between mainlanders and Taiwanese, being like “oh you’re from Taiwan, tell us about the elections, we’d like elections”.

There were protests happening simultaneously in Beijing, and other places too. Actually, I was checking on WeChat at the protest, and somebody was reposting something about violent arrests by police of protesters at Xintiandi, in Shanghai, which is another incredibly wealthy shopping district. I couldn’t figure this out, but I scrolled back later, and think one thing that might have happened was a lot of the people who were at the Saturday night protest tried to call for another vigil at Xintiandi, far from the original vigil site, but I think that basically got rolled up by the cops immediately, because there weren’t enough people there. This also gives us a little bit of a sense of what was going on at Wulumuqi Road, which was in some sense spontaneous. It wasn’t the case that someone called a protest, or anything like that — I really think for most people, it was closer to something like “Wow! Did you see what happened on WeChat? I can go down there — I’m gonna get on my bike, or get on the subway and go see what’s happening.”

At the same time, the Beijing protests were located around Liangmahe, which is a fancy part of town and near a lot of embassies. Coincidentally, Wulumuqi Road is also near a lot of consulate buildings, although I don’t know if that was done on purpose or not. The US consulate is just a couple two blocks from the southernmost police blockade. Perhaps that’s why the police response on the southern end of the road was more violent and more intense, because they don’t want people over there — actually that’s quite near the Iranian consulate as well. Somebody else was telling me at the time that there were videos of people at Liangmahe chanting “free the people arrested in

Shanghai". [12] It felt like it was kind of a similar crowd, similar vibe.

C: People are asking, "will this spread? will it continue?" And it seems like the protests themselves don't have legs, so to speak. But do you think there are particular patterns that will continue in the future, like lockdowns in response to outbreaks that may continue to trigger further protest?

J: We started out talking about the Shanghai lockdown in the spring. I think that for the central government, this is a strong signal that you need to balance your policy, and if you push it, it's a signal of how far you can push before you get pushback. I think that there has been pushback before, during the spring Shanghai lockdown, and more recently in Guangzhou [where unrest and clashes with police broke out in migrant neighborhoods around [November 14](#)], or in the case of [Foxconn](#) in October and November — I think that's there's been all these different instances of people pushing back against covid policy. But looking at online discussion outside the firewall, I think an idea people are using to talk about the people who attended the protests in Shanghai is something like *shehui jingying* 社会精英 ["social elite"]. The commentary I was just looking at was saying something like, "actually, revolutions are not started by the underclass who is unhappy. They are started by an elite class who is no longer able to rationalize what's going on." I can't make a strong prediction myself, but I do think that some people see this kind of elite pushback as the future.

C: I can't help but feel that if I were the big guy [i.e. Xi Jinping], looking at all that's going on around me, and Jiang Zemin just so happens to die right then, and I happen to be superstitious, I would definitely read all of these things as bad omens.

J: Oh it's hell! inauspicious! Do you know where Jiang died? It was at Huashan Hospital, the best hospital in Shanghai, which is just a few blocks from the protest.

C: So basically, if Jiang had opened the window, he could probably have heard the chants of "Xi Jinping, step down!" as he lay there on his deathbed.

J: Yes. [Both laugh] So, if we're thinking of what's going on, I think there's like an undercurrent of dissatisfaction and anger that causes protests that the state structure is relatively effective and experienced in placating or repressing. I think what this is, is a poking through of elites who have better access to communication technology and VPNs, better access to organizing, more money, more legal awareness, and I think that if I were the big guy, I would say, "Ok, I probably do have to pull back, I probably cannot keep doing this, because at some point these people are gonna get connected to internal high-level party people."

C: But, returning to the question of "why now?" What makes this different, really? We could just as easily say "it always has been so". Why now, when it's already been said before a thousand times through the three years of the pandemic, that business people can't stand it any more, or the middle class can't take it anymore, or that the workers are rising up and protesting against covid measures, or hospital workers are going on strike. When housing prices started to fall, or when Evergrande ate shit, all of these people have connections. All of these elites already have their connections, and surely all the party elite also have their opinions. They've always had dissatisfaction. Everyone has been dissatisfied, in different ways.

J: Well, there are many layers. I think there is dissatisfaction with covid policy in general, but there is also this underlying sense of a change in direction. For example, I was talking with a Russian expat here about people like Navalny, and I think there is some overlap in attitude of people who, like a lot of Navalny fans, don't really have politics. Their politics are "I'd like to be a normal country. Can we just be a normal country?" I think that one positive way that people have interpreted *Zhongguo meng* 中国梦 ["The Chinese Dream"] and 社会主义核心价值观 ["The Core Socialist

Values”] is as a statement that “we’re gonna be a normal country”. We’re gonna be civilized, and the world likes us and we are good for the world. I think a lot of [the participants] are people who basically read the New York Times, and want to live in a “normal country”, and who see Xi retaining power as one “not-a-normal-country” thing.

C: Any good conspiracy theory takes?

J: As for the street protest, I may be an unwitting sheep, but I believe that it was spontaneous. I think there was communication among students that created symbols like the “white paper”, which was maybe taken from anti-war protestors in Russia, but maybe it’s just a coincidence. [13] [...] But I don’t think there were particular organizers that told everyone to go there.

P.S.

• Bhuang blog. Apr 8, 2023

<https://chuangcn.org/2023/04/beyond-the-white-paper-an-interview-on-the-social-elite-in-shanghais-protests-of-november-2022/>

Footnotes

[1] https://chuangcn.org/2023/04/beyond-the-white-paper-an-interview-on-the-social-elite-in-shanghais-protests-of-november-2022/#_ednref1

[2] The November wave of struggles as a whole are addressed in “[Three Autumn Revolts: Breaking the Ice on China’s “Anti-Lockdown Movement”](#)” by Zuoyue. We hope to examine those struggles and the conditions of possibility they reveal in future writings.

[3] “Wulumuqi” is the official name of the road written on the street signs. It is the romanized spelling of the Chinese transliteration of Ürümchi, which when referring to the city in Xinjiang is officially rendered as “Urumqi”—a strange spelling that combines Uyghur and Chinese elements. See “[Wulumuqi Road](#)” by Chris Connery (*Made in China*, December 2022).

[4] On the state’s evolving efforts to incorporate non-state entities such as private security companies into its management of the population, see “[Plague Illuminates the Great Unity of All Under Heaven: On the Coming State](#),” in [Social Contagion and other material on microbiological class war in China](#) (Kerr, 2021).

[5] This distribution of resources to calm down unrest is common enough to have led to the phrase 各取所需, a bastardization of “to each according to their need” that replaces “need” with “noisy complaint.”

[6] As has been the case elsewhere, definitions of what counts as a death due to covid have been flexible and politicised, with the state explicitly minimizing death numbers.

[7] https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_20907603 >This article describes that briefing.

[8] These problems of posts being blocked for people in other locations were reported by so many

WeChat users that state media was forced to address the phenomenon as a “false rumor.” [This article](#) on the issue notes that Shanghai internet cops had shut down 30 online groups and punished 23 individuals for spreading rumors. The name of one group was reported to be *Sidangqun* 死党群 — literally the “Dead Party Group” but implying something more like “the despicable party group.” (哔哩哔哩网 23 April 2022.)

[9] Life turned upside down in Ruili, China, the world’s strictest zero-Covid city,” SCMP, 23 October 2022

[10] It’s worth noting that Sun Chunlan’s [statements](#) in the days following the protests did indicate a relaxation and change in lockdown policy, albeit without mentioning popular anger.

[11] Apple is reported as having [restricted](#) airdrop functionality by time-limiting access to the function in response to its use in China following the Sitong Bridge banner drop, but these updates seemed not to have hit phones by the time of these protests in November 2022. Friends report that random airdropped advertisements still show up on subway rides as of this Spring.

[12] For a detailed Chinese account of the Liangmahe protest, see [哔哩哔哩网](#) from Initium, 29 November 2022.

[13] The origin of the blank sheets of white paper became a topic of debate in movement circles that has not yet been resolved, to our knowledge. In early December, for example, [images](#) circulated stating that a student at Communication University of China, Nanjing (中国传媒大学) named Li Kangmeng (李康萌) had been arrested on November 30, and that she was “the first person to hold up white paper” (without indication of when she first did this or where she got the idea), but [other posts](#) claim to debunk this. Some accounts say the tactic was adopted from the 2019 movement in [Hong Kong](#), while others says it was adopted from anti-war protestors in [Russia](#) — who in turn are said to have gotten the idea from a Soviet-era [joke](#)