

A4 Revolution: Exacerbating Conflicts between the State and Society in China

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On the 26 and 27 of November 2022, Shanghai residents gathered on Wulumuqi Road to mourn the victims who died in the fire due to excessive preventive controls on the 24th in Urumqi, Xinjiang. However, the mourning event turned into a protest. Some people held up and pasted white paper to the tree. Some people even shouted slogans such as “Xi Jinping, step down!” and “Communist party, step down!” Meanwhile, many universities in China joined the protests. The students from Beijing, Tianjin, and Nanjing gathered and held up white paper and slogans during the demonstration. Therefore, the media started to use the White Paper Movement or White Paper

Revolution to describe the protests happening in numerous places in China.¹The CCP has implemented the Zero-COVID policy for almost three years. Why did the White Paper Movement break out at this time? How is the White Paper Movement going to influence the relations between the state and society in China? This article will analyze the cause of the White Paper Movement and predict the future trend from the events that happened these days.

White Paper Movement: The Simmering Anger of the People Finally Exploded

In recent years, the relations between

1. Chu Bailiang, Wang Yuemei, Chang Che, Amy Chang Chien, “After a Deadly Blaze, a Surge of Defiance Against China’s Covid Policies,” *cn.nytimes.com*, November 2nd, 2022, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20221128/china-covid-protest/zh-hant/>.

the state and society have been very tense. The economic and social problems triggered by the Zero-COVID policy have further led to public grievances. The Chinese people have faced normalized quarantine procedures and PCR testing over the past three years. Even their livelihoods and cross-provincial activities are affected due to the regional differences in the Health Code standards.² After Shanghai entered a strict lockdown in mid-2022, shocking China and the world, a series of secondary disasters happened due to strict lockdown measures. For example, the quarantine bus crash in Guiyang was caused due to the local authorities rushing those who tested positive to a quarantine facility, killing 27 of those on board. In Lanzhou, a boy was poisoned by gas at home, and the lockdown delayed potentially lifesaving treatment. In mid-October, Foxconn's Zhengzhou Factory was closed to align with the lockdown policy. With the pressure from the Zero-

COVID policy, the employees had to walk home from the factory.³ On November 11th, the CCP rolled out the "Notice of Further Optimizing the Prevention and Control of COVID-19" ("The 20th Notice"), which is seen as the contributing factor to the White Paper Movement. The 20th Notice is seen as an adjustment to loosen the Zero-COVID policy, which is self-contradictory. Compounded with the chaos brought by the overly strict implementation of the policy, public grievances are boiling over.⁴ Although the CCP implemented strict internet censorship to stop the above incidents from spreading, we can imagine that the public grievances are exacerbated due to the secondary disasters and the local government's preventive control performance. The above-mentioned state-social interaction characterizes the political regime of China. Moving from authoritarian to totalitarian or autocracy, the CCP lacks checks and balances, and

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2. Luo Ya, Cheng Jing, "The CCP Proposed to Unify the Health Code. Analysts say: It's Endless Torture to Civilians," *hk.epochtimes.com*, September 5, 2022, <https://hk.epochtimes.com/news/2022-09-05/38450248>.
 3. Li Xueli, Tang Lianguang, "The fire of Urumqi sparked protests in China. The White Paper Movement Spread on the Internet. Citizens in Shanghai: The Protestors Finally Gathered Together," *The Reporter*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.twreporter.org/a/covid-19-urumqi-lockdown-fire-protests-across-china>.
 4. "The 20th Notice: Public Grievances are Boiling over Due to Inconsistent Preventive Controls; The Government is Now Promoting Viruses are Not Scary and Rolled out Q&A to Ease Public Concerns," *The News Lens*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/176740>.

extreme and impulsive policies such as the Zero-COVID policy were born. The state governs the society and the local governments with a heavy hand, leading to inappropriate responses to the central policies from the local governments—they either do nothing or overdo it.⁵ Socially, the state strongly suppresses mechanisms or organizations that could alleviate conflicts, leaving the people with no channel to voice their opinions. Public grievances are like a pressure cooker without a pressure valve. The pot is full of pressure and will eventually break down.

From “No Lockdown” to “CCP, Step Down”

It is worth noticing that slogans such as “Xi Jinping, Step Down!” and “CCP, Step Down!” appeared during the protest. Since China’s Reform and Opening-up,

few people have dared to criticize CCP leaders during a protest. These slogans may be inspired by the Beijing Sitong Bridge protest prior to the 20th National Congress of the CCP, but also show the difficulty the CCP is currently facing.⁶ Since the Tiananmen Square incident, social movements in China have rarely been confrontational or political, let alone targeting top leaders of the CCP. In the past, protests in China were usually about solving labor or land dispute and were mainly material. These protests were seldom cross-provincial, and the targets of the people were limited to the business owners or local government, with the central government being the “judge”. Past opinion polls also indicated that Chinese people had much more trust in the central government than in the local government.⁷ Therefore, the CCP

5. Hsu Szu-Chien and Chan-Hsi Wang, “The Disappearing Authoritarian Resilience-State Social Relations under Xi Jinping,” edited by Xu S., *The Great Chess Game of Xi Jinping: The Limits of Post-Totalitarian Transformation* (Taipei: Left Bank Culture, 2016), p. 83-114.

6. On October 13, 2022, shortly before the 20th National Congress, a protester hung a banner against the CCP and Xi Jinping on the Sitong Bridge in Beijing, one of which read, “Say no to Covid tests, yes to food. No to lockdown, yes to freedom. No to lies, yes to dignity. No to Cultural Revolution, yes to reforms. No to the leader, yes to vote. Don’t be a slave, be a citizen. Remove dictator and national traitor Xi Jinping. The foreign media calls the incident ‘The Sitong Bridge protest’ and the protestor ‘The Sitong Bridge Warrior’. The iron is still there to make weapons: Beijing Sitong Bridge banner incident: ‘Remove dictator and national traitor Xi Jinping’,” *UDN Global Vision*, October 14, 2022, https://global.udn.com/global_vision/story/8662/6686023.

7. Hsin-Hao Huang, “Explaining Hierarchical Government Trust in China: The Perspectives of Institutional Shaping and Perceived Performance,” *Political Science Review*, Vol. 59, No. 3, March 2014, p. 55-90.

could shift social pressure onto the local government to maintain regime stability. However, when the CCP regime moves towards totalitarianism or dictatorship, Xi Jinping and the top elites around him will be held accountable. Therefore, even if the CCP succeeds in suppressing the protests in various places this time, there will be more protests similar to the White Paper Movement in the future.

The state continues to govern with a heavy hand, but backlash from domestic public opinion has emerged

The White Paper Movement represents the overflowing public discontent in Chinese society, so much so that many people are willing to gather for the protest despite the risk of being arrested or punished. The CCP is likely to take action to suppress and arrest protesters and increase its efforts to block information on the Internet to prevent the protests from escalating. As mentioned before, the CCP under Xi Jinping has destroyed the “pressure valve” where people can voice opinions and fight for rights, forcing the people to gather and hold Xi Jinping and the top leaders of the CCP accountable. The situation would worry the CCP even more and force them

to take tougher actions against the people as they are afraid conceding might lead to a chain reaction or even the collapse of the regime. Although the CCP may continue to promote the 20th Notice to relax local prevention measures and alleviate public discontent, the White Paper Movement represents a challenge to the operation and stability of CCP politics. The social conflicts will likely become more intense and politicized in the future, posing a considerable threat to the CCP regime. Meanwhile, the internal social conflicts in China may prompt the CCP to take a tougher stance towards cross-strait affairs to shift domestic discontent with the CCP regime. The future development of the cross-strait situation deserves our continuous attention.

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