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Unwritten Endings: Revolutionary Potential of China's A4 Protest

Kin-man Chan*

Department of Sociology, National Chengchi University of Taiwan (Taiwan)

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Abstract

The A4 or White Paper Revolution refers to a series of protests against China's draconian Zero-Covid policy that started in November 2022. Although the protests did not last long, they debunked the myth that stringent pandemic measures were widely supported by the Chinese people. Additionally, they revealed the potential for social mobilization in China, regardless of the forceful crackdown on civil society and media censorship by the regime. This paper analyzes how the protests were able to garner support from a wide spectrum of people and circumvent the structural constraints imposed by an increasingly totalitarian regime. It demonstrates that hegemony will never be complete and that resistance is possible even under a "perfect dictatorship."

Keywords: COVID; China; protest; youth; internet.

* kmchancuhk@gmail.com

1 Introduction: Revolution or Not?

The "A4" or "White Paper Revolution," as dubbed by international media, refers to a series of protests against China's draconian Zero-Covid policy that started in November 2022. The term "revolution" was apparently overstated, as the protests were limited in size and the appeals were mixed. However, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) found the protests alarming, as they debunked the myth that stringent pandemic measures were widely supported by the Chinese people. Additionally, the protests revealed the potential for social mobilization, regardless of the forceful crackdown on civil society and media censorship by the regime through advanced digital technology. In this regard, the protests demonstrated revolutionary potential, which explains why some Chinese officials and media named them a "color revolution" (Buckley, 2022). This paper analyzes how the protests were able to garner support from a wide spectrum of people and circumvent the structural constraints imposed by an increasingly totalitarian regime. It demonstrates that hegemony will never be complete (Scott, 1985) and that resistance is possible even under a "perfect dictatorship" (Ringen, 2016).

2 Beyond the Zero-Covid Policy

The protest was triggered by a fire that broke out in a building in Ürümqi, the capital city of Xinjiang, killing 10 people and injuring 9 in a residential area under lockdown. Since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, China had implemented a stringent Zero-Covid policy, which involved locking down communities where infected cases were found. Infected patients were sent to massive quarantine centers, while other residents were required to stay home and were subjected to regular Covid-19 tests. Entrances to communities were blocked by barricades stationed by the police. Food and other daily necessities were distributed by the authorities or collectively purchased by residents through online shopping. Before the fire, there were already complaints about the shortage of supplies of basic necessities in the region. People became particularly angry when firefighters were unable to reach the building due to the blockages installed for the lockdown. They were further agitated by the irresponsible comments made by local officials blaming the victims for not escaping in time.

The incident immediately went viral on Chinese social media, sparking enormous public anger towards the prolonged Zero-Covid policy. Although the regime claimed that the stringent measures were to protect people's lives, as time passed, more and more people began to question their effectiveness and even the motives behind them. While the spread of Covid-19 might have been contained, many patients with other diseases were not properly treated due to the lockdown and reshuffling of medical staff to quarantine centers. The lockdown also led to a severe recession since the economic reform in the 1980s. Many factories and shops were forced to close down, and people had to live on their savings after losing their jobs. The poor and elderly were particularly affected and felt forsaken by the government. The deadly fire in Ürümqi provided a vivid image of the vulnerability of life in the face of state hypocrisy.

Moreover, as many countries in the world had decided to "coexist with the virus," the Chinese were astonished to find out from broadcasts of the 2022 FIFA World Cup that tens of thousands of spectators could gather in a stadium in Qatar without wearing masks. A post made by a Chinese netizen satirizing whether Qatar was "on a different planet" received overwhelming echoes. If these control measures were no longer needed in other countries, why did the Chinese authorities insist on implementing an unpopular lockdown? Some began to question if the party had ulterior motives behind the Zero-Covid policy.

On 13 October 2022, on the eve of the 20th National Congress of the CCP, two banners were hung by a citizen on the Sitong Bridge in Beijing. One banner read, "We don't need Covid tests, we need to eat; we don't need lockdowns, we need freedom; we don't need lies, we need dignity; we don't need Cultural Revolution, we need reform; we don't need leaders, we need votes; we are not slaves, we are citizens." The other banner directly asked for the stepdown of dictator Xi Jinping. The banners were swiftly removed, but the slogans were surprisingly adopted by many protesters in the later A4 protest.

The Sitong Bridge incident was particularly significant as Xi was confirmed for his third term as the General Secretary of the CCP in its party congress (later his third term as President of the People's Republic of China was also confirmed by the National People's Congress), indicating Xi's indefinite rule in China. The move had been very controversial as the Constitution had to be amended to cancel the term limit for the presidency. Some suspected that the lockdown was a convenient tool for Xi to pre-empt any form of opposition in society.

The Sitong Bridge banners incident was not the only example of the lockdown being associated with suppression of freedom. On 24 November, a man, later known as the Chongqing Superman, was recorded giving a speech on the street, loudly proclaiming "Give me liberty, or give me death!" to the cheers and applause of the crowd. He criticized the authorities for exaggerating the pandemic and claimed that poverty and a lack of freedom were the only true diseases in the world, and the Chinese had both.

Against this backdrop, when the deadly blaze in Ürümqi occurred, the entire country was ignited. From 26 November 2022, protests and candlelight vigils commemorating the victims of the fire spread to 51 universities and many large cities such as Nanjing, Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Wuhan, and Guangzhou. In Nanjing, posters criticizing the Zero-Covid policy were taken down, and in protest, a student stood on the steps of the Communication University of China in Nanjing holding a blank sheet of paper, satirizing the censorship imposed by the authorities. Later, hundreds of students gathered on the steps with blank sheets of paper that triggered the A4 protest nationwide (Davidson & Yu, 2022).

In Shanghai, young people gathered on Ürümqi Road to mourn for the fire victims. They lit candles and laid flowers, while also holding pieces of white paper over their faces or heads. Hundreds of protesters boldly chanted, "Step down, Xi Jinping! Step down, Communist Party!," "We want freedom," and "We don't want the Health Code." Protests in other cities took similar forms, such as holding white papers and chanting slogans similar to those on the Sitong Bridge banners. Although there were sporadic conflicts between the police and protesters, both sides exercised a high degree of self-control. Eventually, the authorities responded by arresting some protesters, including the first student holding a white paper in Nanjing, but they also lifted the Zero-Covid measures, including the lockdown. The protest ended in early December 2022.

3 Transcending Localities and Classes

Despite only lasting 10 days and having a limited number of participants compared to China's huge population, the A4 protest was exceptional in its ability to appeal to a wide spectrum of people by openly relating an unpopular health policy to the authoritarian nature of the regime. This is a departure from the norm in China, where many protests are localized and seldom connected to each other, making it difficult to develop into organized efforts for promoting social change.

In rural China, violent resistance from peasants is not uncommon when local officials attempt to obtain funds or acquire land from them (Li & O'Brien, 1996). Though Chinese peasants have developed a consciousness in protecting their properties, struggles of this kind are usually confined to certain localities, with peasants in other villages not getting involved or becoming concerned with more structural issues such as land ownership registration. Urbanites often see these land disputes as none of their business, except when they are themselves forced to leave their homes due to urban renewal.

In Chinese cities, strikes are a common form of protest due to the insufficient protections of labor (Lee, 2020; Pun, 2005) Since the economic reforms of the 1980s, hundreds of millions of Chinese peasants have left their hometowns to work in factories, construction sites, restaurants, or other service units in the cities. However, the working conditions are often poor, and workers receive extremely low salaries. This is how the "world factory" was built.

The new generation of Chinese workers, born after the 1980s and having migrated to the cities after the 1990s, have much higher aspirations for life. They usually have no farming experience and are not prepared to return to their rural hometowns in the future. They aspire to live like regular Chinese urbanites with a decent level of consumption. They ask for higher pay and better protections for themselves in terms of medicine and children's education (Chen & Tang, 2013). Though strikes are rather frequent in China, they are usually wildcat in nature and are not connected, due to the lack of independent trade unions. They also find it hard to gain sympathy from urban middle class as the latter also rely on cheap labor to provide them with affordable goods and services.

The protest against the Zero-Covid policy was very different from the rural and urban resistance discussed above, as it appealed to people across localities and classes. No matter if people were living in first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, or second-tier ones like Lanzhou or Jinan, their lives were equally disturbed by the drastic lockdown measures. While workers in Foxconn fought with security guards when attempting to return to their hometowns from their seized dormitories, people also saw a video clip of an upper middle-class Chinese charging the barricades with a BMW sedan.

The lockdown policy was easily politicized as it was a top-down policy that did not allow for local authorities to have any leeway. In China, there is a long-standing myth that local officials are corrupt while top leaders are honest. This myth has been sustained by censoring reports of corruption among top leaders while allowing for exposure of local officials' corruption in the media. This creates a buffer for the CCP central leadership, who can conveniently blame local officials for unpopular policies. It localizes grievances and resistance (Xiang, 2010). However, in the case of the Zero-Covid policy, local governments also suffered from the significant decrease in taxes and revenues due to business shutdowns. People understood that it was a nationwide policy imposed by the central government and even Xi himself. The grievances could no longer be localized, and slogans directly targeting the CCP and Xi were chanted by the protesters.

Looking back, the A4 protest was the only protest after the 1989 democracy movement that successfully traced the political root of a policy problem. In 1989, students appealed to ordinary citizens that their struggle for democracy was to tackle the rampant corruption leading to a surge in inflation. The A4 protesters in 2022 also critically related the Zero-Covid policy to the suppression of freedom, particularly Xi's personal dictatorship.

4 The Structural Constraints of Social Mobilization

Although the protests against the Zero-Covid policy gained widespread support, research has shown that grievances, psychological disturbances, or structural strains do not constitute sufficient conditions to develop a social movement. A social movement organization or network is required to gather resources and disseminate information during the mobilization process. Political opportunity is also a crucial factor that contributes to the success of a protest (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; McAdam, 1982). In China, the suppression of civil society and tight control over social media have resulted in sporadic protests that are isolated and short-lived, because there is no social base to develop an organized or networked movement (Castells, 2015).

After the crackdown on the 1989 democracy movement, all autonomous student and worker organizations were outlawed, and intellectual exchanges, such as salons or independent publications, were closely monitored or banned by the authorities for a decade following the movement. However, grassroots NGOs emerged in the fields of women's issues, the environment, education, labor, and patient rights during Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao's more liberal rule between 2002–2012. Many of these NGOs were funded by overseas foundations in Hong Kong, Taiwan, the US, and Europe, and some universities in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong established training programs for these NGOs (Spires et al., 2014). Most of these NGOs were small in scale and ambiguous in legal status, though they were supported by volunteers and informal government ties. While some attempted to organize protests for disadvantaged groups, such as people infected with hepatitis B, most of them remained as service providers without overstepping forbidden boundaries, such as organizing strikes among workers (Chan et al., 2005). In the field of environmental protections, an anti-dam construction movement emerged as an exceptional case, garnering support from journalists, environmental groups, and local villagers, and successfully forcing the state to respond (Chan & Zhou, 2014). Mertha (2009) argued that it was due to the political opportunities created by the internal strife between different ministries and the divergent interests between the central and local governments in China.

However, after Xi Jinping took power in 2012, civic space in China began to contract. In 2013, an internal party document titled "The Current Situation of the Ideological Front" was circulated, prohibiting Chinese from discussing seven sensitive subjects, including universal values, freedom of speech, civil society, civil rights, the historical errors of the CCP, crony capitalism, and judicial independence (Carlson, 2013). Human rights lawyers and activists were jailed or forced into exile, labor and advocacy groups were banned, and new regulations were promulgated to facilitate the development of social service groups into the executive arm of the government and restrain the activities of overseas NGOs in China. More local foundations were encouraged to establish to reduce the influence of foreign funding on NGOs (Chan & Lai, 2018). As a result, the organizational base for protests was further weakened, making sustainable social mobilization almost impossible.

Since the early 2000s, the widespread use of the internet has given rise to a new form of social mobilization across the globe — social media networks, rather than civil society organizations. These "networked movements" are particularly effective at rallying large numbers of protesters in a short period of time, but their outcomes are often unpredictable. According to Castells (2015), networked movements are better at creating cultural change than bringing about systemic reform, as their leadership is too diffuse to formulate concrete proposals for change. Nevertheless, the CCP was alarmed by the impact of social media mobilization on the toppling of authoritarian regimes during the 21st century color revolutions. As a result,

Weibo, the most important Chinese social media platform, was subjected to close censorship. Key opinion leaders critical of the party were silenced, and netizens were forced to use personal communication platforms such as WeChat or QQ to express their opinions on public issues. While these messages are still monitored by advanced technology that detects keywords, netizens still find ways to communicate dissenting views through private domains and hidden transcripts.

University campuses are an important space for young intellectuals to engage in debates about public issues, despite the presence of party organizations that are tasked with identifying potential opposition. While cafeterias and dormitories could provide a space for private conversations, online discussion had become more important among university students particularly during the epidemic. Based on an empirical research in Xi'an, Feng (2022) found that many university students were psychologically stressed during the closure of campuses as most universities were not well prepared for logistical supplies of medicine and other necessities. They lost confidence on information provided by the authorities, but relied more on online information and discussion platforms using various apps. Feng found that these students were susceptive to worst scenario information resulting in negative emotions expressed during online discussions. This study provides an useful background to understand how the first student in Nanjing holding a blank piece of paper to protest against the Zero-Covid policy could spark a movement that quickly spread to 51 universities.

At the community level, the lockdown also fostered a spirit of mutual assistance among residents in the same district, providing people with opportunities to share their grievances, if not their political opinions, with others. Video clips of residents charging police barricades to the cheers of their neighbors were widely circulated on social media during the later stage of the lockdown. To circumvent internet censorship, Chinese netizens replaced politically sensitive words with homophones, initials, or metaphors. They would immediately screenshot or download sensitive material, such as good writings, photos, or video clips, before they were erased by internet police. They also used VPNs to get access to forbidden apps and websites.

However, sustaining the protests beyond a few days posed a significant challenge, as it was too risky to form organizations to formulate goals and strategies or to coordinate resources and efforts. Even personal communications on the internet were immediately under close surveillance. Police around protest sites would stop and search citizens' mobile phones to check if they had taken photos or videos for further circulation. They even blocked local telecommunication signals to avoid any spreading of news regarding the protests. As a result, the protests came to an end when many people were appeased by the lifting of the lockdown measures. These spheres of communication in universities, communities, and the internet were significant in making the A4 protest possible, but they were not enough to sustain the movement in the long run.

5 Conclusion: Chinese Youth and the Power of the Internet

The A4 protest, as discussed, was the first protest after the 1989 democracy movement to successfully appeal to people across different geographical boundaries and social strata in China. While many protesters opposed the Zero-Covid policy, some also targeted the authoritarian regime as the root cause of the problem. An article written by a protester in Beijing, published in an overseas Chinese magazine, reported that most protesters did not echo political slogans beyond the Zero-Covid policy. Some male protesters even chanted slogans such as "we want Covid tests" to ridicule the government while protecting themselves. However, many female

protesters, apparently university students inspired by a female protester in Nanjing, were brave enough to chant political slogans such as "no Covid test but freedom" (Pao, 2023). Though many participants reported the liberating experiences in the process, the A4 protest stopped when the state arrested the "leaders" and lifted the lockdown to soothe the grievances of others. The more fundamental reason for the short duration of the protest, however, rested on the lack of organizational capacity and freedom of communication. Despite all its weaknesses, the protest reveals two important phenomena deserving further attention.

First, the A4 revolution exhibited the courage and critical mindset of young protesters, contradicting the portrayal of Chinese youth by the media. The group of Little Pink, young jingoistic Chinese nationalists active in writing pro-CCP and anti-West posts on the internet, including Twitter and Instagram, had misled people to believe that the new generation of Chinese are loyal supporters of the "China model" as they are the beneficiaries of the economic reforms in the past four decades. In fact, closer observers of China already found two important trends among young Chinese in recent years inconsistent with the patriot depiction.

The first trend is the idea of *runxue* ["runology," or "knowledge of running away"], indicating that people not only wanted to escape from a city before the lockdown, but also were determined to leave the country as they found the future of China gloomy. In mid-March 2022, when the Chinese government announced the continuation of the Zero-Covid policy, the frequency of using the word "emigration" in the Chinese internet search engine increased by 440% (Huang, 2022). It even became a sensitive word when the National People's Congress amended the constitution to remove the term limit of the PRC President. The second trend is the idea of *tang ping* ["lying flat"], referring to the refusal of young people to follow social expectations of being aspirational and hardworking. They vowed not to buy a house or car, not to marry or have children, but to live a simple life rather than becoming slaves of the system. This retreatism was seen as passive resistance to the goals set by the regime and was criticized by the CCP as nihilistic and counter-productive to the great revival of the Chinese nation.

The slogans against the Zero-Covid policy, the suppression of freedom of speech, and the smearing of the protest as a collusion of foreign forces, as well as those ultimately questioning the legitimacy of the CCP and Xi Jinping, demonstrated the potential of active resistance to the regime among young people beyond compliance, escapism, and retreatism. A report of young protesters in Guangzhou showed that it was an extremely liberating experience for them to chant slogans in front of the police. When they were ordered to leave, they requested a promise from the police not to press charges after the protest and asked to leave in groups so that they would not be easily arrested or harassed. The success of these negotiations greatly reduced the longstanding fear in their hearts (Qi, 2023). We could also imagine how encouraging it would be for them when the authorities finally repealed the Zero-Covid policy.

The second lesson learned from the A4 protest is that important messages can circulate even on the highly censored Chinese internet. The slogans on the Sitong Bridge banners and the statements made by the Chongqing Superman persisted and echoed among the A4 protesters despite swift removal and arrests by the police. Once photos or video clips of these dramatic incidents were uploaded to the internet, they were immediately screenshotted or downloaded by some netizens, despite censorship by the authorities. Breaking through the Great Firewall and circumventing censorship is a game of speed and technique.

A young protester in Chengdu said that it brought him a sleepless night after viewing the protest in front of the Communication University of China in Nanjing on November 26. He continued to view the livestream of the mourning vigil in Shanghai till 5:00 am next morning and then spent the rest of the day on bed discussing with friends over the internet. Besides

WeChat, he relied very much on banned apps such as Instagram and Telegram to view and discuss sensitive contents. What triggered him most was when he saw a photo sent from a good friend to a chat group. In the photo, his friend stood at a public square in front of a auditorium in some Chinese city with a A4 paper sticked on his chest. On the paper, was printed a QR code. When he scanned the QR code, it led to a link that collected piles of photos of students from different universities protesting with white papers. He decided to join the protest so that his friend "will not be alone standing there" (Mao, 2022).

Despite China's more than 1 billion internet users being constantly monitored by internet police and advanced technologies, the slogans chanted during the A4 protest demonstrated that people still struggle to preserve and circulate sensitive information. As long as people are brave enough to express themselves in front of others with mobile phones, their messages may eventually reach an unpredictable size of audience. As Castells (2015) argued:

> They become a movement of resistance through an unforeseen chain of events. It is rarely the case that leaders plot the revolt. They usually become leaders by joining the movement on their own terms. It is precisely the unpredictable nature of these revolts that makes them dangerous and uncontrollable (p. 347).

The magnitude and duration of the A4 protest may not deserve the name "revolution," but it does renew our understanding of the unsettled Chinese youth and the power of the internet under dictatorships.

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Kin-man Chan – Department of Sociology, National Chengchi University of Taiwan (Taiwan)
✉ kmchancuhk@gmail.com; https://chankinman.wordpress.com

Kin-man Chan received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1995 and is currently a Visiting Professor at Department of Sociology, National Chengchi University of Taiwan (Taiwan) and also a member of the Hong Kong Research Program at the Institute of Sociology, Sinica Academia of Taiwan. Before he moved to Taiwan, he had served as Associate Professor of Sociology, Director of Universities Service Center for China Studies, Founder and Director of Centre for Civil Society Studies and Research Fellow at Center for Social Innovation Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research focus is on civil society, social movement and democratic development in Chinese societies. He is a board member of the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) and has served in the advisory council of the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, and the editorial board of *Journal of Civil Society*. He published nine Chinese books including *Kin-man Chan's Letters from the Prison*, *Towards Civil Society*, and *The Difficult Transition: Modernization and the Chinese Society* (with Zhong Hua). Dr. Chan is deeply committed to the democracy movement in Hong Kong and was dubbed by the media as one of the "Occupy Trio". He was sentenced to jail for 16 months due to his involvement in the 2014 Umbrella Movement.