

Three Autumn Revolts: Breaking the Ice on China's "Anti-Lockdown Movement"

Sunday 22 January 2023, by [Chuang](#) (Date first published: 23 December 2022).

The article we've translated below was originally self-published by the author, pen-named Zuoyue (左月), on [Matters](#) in early January, after an [abridged version](#) was published on the Taiwanese news website Reporter台灣報導. The author explains that they are a young left-leaning labor activist from mainland China currently studying abroad after having been involved in on-the-ground organizing with migrant workers for nearly a decade. We've chosen to translate this article here because it's one of the first efforts within the mainland left to analyze the events of late November 2022.[\[1\]](#) It also provides a good supplement to the many partial accounts already available in English.[\[2\]](#)

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So far, the piece has met with mixed responses from comrades in China. Friends of Chuang have noted that the author had been living outside of the country for a while by the time of the events. This distance provides a more objective vantage point in some ways, but it also means that the ideas reflect less the discussions happening among participants and observers on the ground, and more the framework of online left-liberal networks and the Chinese diaspora communities that form such an important topic in the article. In any case, the article is an icebreaker for much-needed critical discussion of the events.[\[3\]](#) This is particularly important at a time when people more directly involved are still in police custody or laying low, and have therefore been unable or hesitant to offer any systematic reflection.



The piece is also helpful in clarifying our own perspective on the events, which differs from that of the author in several respects. For example, the author uses the term "white paper movement" interchangeably with "anti-lockdown protest wave" to describe the broader collection of struggles that peaked in November 2022. At first glance, this choice seems strange given that the article then goes on to distinguish symbolic protests involving blank pieces of white paper (attributed to "the

domestic movement of urbanites and students”) from the two other major currents (“worker protests” and “overseas solidarity protests”), and even explains how this phrasing obscures the role played by workers: “When the white paper is cited as the emblem of the whole movement [...] discussions about the movement in its entirety become solely oriented around the political protests of urbanites and students, or on the solidarity campaigns held in overseas Chinese communities.” By the end of the article, however, the persistent use of “white paper movement” comes to suggest a deeper ambiguity baked into the analytic framework of the piece as a whole. While the argument helpfully outlines a number of key tensions that arose within the wave of unrest and attempts to think through their limits, it also seems to understate the depth of these contradictions—and, we might argue, to overstate the mutual influences among the “three movements.” Thus, the idea of a singular “movement” repeatedly appears alongside appeals to the consciousness of “the ordinary people” as a sort of aspirational subject that the movement was unable to cohere. Similarly, the importance of “worker protests” is connected not to a Marxian understanding of class conflict but instead to a Rawlsian theory of “unfair social distribution.” Finally, the goal posed for all these struggles is for them to “overcome the repressive apparatus and statist hegemony consciousness” by means of “politicization,” suggesting that a generalized politics is possible only if it defines itself against a monstrous and solitary state—pitting one phantom against another.

In short, the article seems firmly rooted within a left-liberal paradigm despite sensing its constraints, and therefore tends to flatten some of the deeper antagonisms evident in the disparate struggles, reducing them to a failure of different fractions to adequately link up and thereby cohere into a more general movement. The implication seems to be that, had these three currents been able to interact and talk out their tensions, they could have formed some sort of program that adequately represented the collective will of the people. The article’s premise rules out the possibility that the basic interests of elite protestors in Shanghai may have been diametrically opposed to those of proletarians rioting in urban villages. The piece is therefore best understood as a specifically *leftist* analysis of the events, viewed from a distance and filtered through a series of specific lenses. One of these lenses is the “new generation of overseas Chinese diaspora communities,” which the article describes as particularly significant despite the small-scale and non-disruptive character of such solidarity protests—in contrast with many of the direct actions and even some of the symbolic protests in China. We agree that the overseas protests signaled a shift of consciousness among a certain fraction of educated young Chinese people, but they seem to have played a more ancillary role in relation to the confluence of actual social conflicts.[4]

Another of these lenses involves the article’s portrayal of “worker protests,” which aggregates a variety of conflicts that were not only disparate but sometimes even contradictory in their underlying goals. In this case, it’s not only the “white paper” emblem that obscures such struggles, but also the characterization of all discontent as part of a more general anti-lockdown movement.[5] The Zhengzhou Foxconn struggle, in particular, is highlighted as “inspiring the entire movement that followed.” Although videos from the conflict surely exerted some influence on both the symbolic protests and some of the direct actions, none of the participant accounts we’ve heard or read even mentioned Foxconn when asked about their motivation,[6] and when asked about Foxconn explicitly, no one we’ve talked to has considered it more relevant than any of the countless other struggles and disasters somehow related to lockdowns over the past year. On the level of goals, the Foxconn workers were concerned primarily with particular questions of workplace safety (in October) and the issue of promised bonus payments that failed to materialize (the most prominent issue in the November riot). In both cases, workers’ opposition to pandemic measures was not an expression of some general anti-lockdown sentiment but must instead be placed in the context of “closed-loop” forms of factory management, which carried specific risks not experienced by the general population. Eli Friedman has [explained](#) the general arc of the struggle: “As infections spread within the factory, workers reasonably feared that remaining in the loop was increasing their exposure to

illness. On-site quarantine was terribly managed, and people who fell ill reported being denied adequate care or even enough food to eat.”[\[7\]](#) The piece also tends to invoke the classic leftist image of the productive worker to the exclusion of a broader communist understanding of proletarian struggles. In reality, most of the proletarian actions in November and the previous months didn’t involve the workplace at all, but were instead various forms of direct action undertaken by (employed, unemployed, and self-employed) proletarians within the sphere of reproduction, taking on their most conflictual character within the urban villages. As the author correctly points out, these urban village protests had been occurring long before the “white paper” movement began and persisted after it had dissolved.

Nonetheless, this piece offers an excellent icebreaker for the discussion of these events, which we hope to return to in more detail in the coming months. The article’s strongest points are its informative narration of November’s key events and their background, the important distinction it makes between separate currents within the broader wave of unrest, its identification of the tensions that existed between them, and its expression of a more general shift that has begun to occur within the specific circles of urbanites and students within China, and of young members of the Chinese diaspora. It therefore serves as both an analysis of events and an object of analysis in its own right—a window into the social unrest of late 2022 itself, and to the political discussions taking place among a certain current of participants and overseas supporters.

Chuang

Why Were the White Paper Protests Comprised of Three Movements? Understanding the Revolutionary Features and Limitations of the Anti- Lockdown Protest Wave

[8]

Zuoyue

December 23, 2022

As local governments everywhere have begun to [subpoena and detain](#) participants in a low profile, it is now undeniable that the wave of White Paper Protests instigated by three years of harsh lockdowns has already come to a rapid end. This wave of resistance—widely seen as the only nationwide protest wave since 1989—saw the rapid formation of a spontaneous alliance between workers, urbanites and students that spanned regions. Politicized slogans even cut across class lines to gain a certain degree of general acceptance. In that moment within Chinese society, this rising tide of movement undoubtedly possessed a revolutionary character, or we could at least say that it exposed the issues that had long been accumulating within society and thereby marked a qualitative shift, completely reworking our image of mass protests in the country.

Even with the lifting of the lockdowns, through which the demands of the masses were apparently met (despite society sinking into another form of “disorder” due to the government’s extreme decision to [“lie flat”](#)), there is no reason to believe that the accumulated political energy of this wave

will vanish into thin air as in the mass movements of the past. But how has this movement dissolved in such a short period of time? Aside from the usual difficulties posed by government repression, how might we understand and reflect on the revolutionary character and limits of this wave of protests? As a long-time activist within domestic NGOs and grassroots [labor] organizations, I will here attempt to anatomize the three parallel movements that existed within the broader wave of struggles, clarifying their points of interaction and tension and offering a few practical reflections on the movement.

Why Did the Wave of Anti-Lockdown Protests Occur?

Although the White Paper Protests were ignited by the tragic fire in Ürümqi, in looking back at the nature of the movement, we cannot ignore either the systematic humanitarian catastrophe or the political-economic crisis caused by three years of “Zero-COVID.” As many netizens commented, it seems as if Zero-COVID had become the new generation’s “fundamental national policy” (国家根本政策).[9] In every aspect—ranging from the economic to the everyday, including healthcare, culture and mental health—people’s needs were forced into compliance with this political mission, with no margin for compromise or consultation. Since the Omicron variant was highly transmissible and difficult to control, the first half of 2022 saw more than 400 million people across the country forced into stagnant lockdowns, which were especially prominent in Shanghai and border regions such as Xinjiang, Tibet and Yunnan.[10] The various secondary disasters and the economic, livelihood and political crises caused by the lockdowns ultimately became the core elements that ignited the protests.

Secondary Disasters

On the 24th of November, lockdown measures led to the deaths of at least ten people (all Uyghurs) in a fire in Ürümqi, Xinjiang. That night, the news broadcast a statement by officials criticizing the victims, saying that “some residents showed a poor ability to protect and rescue themselves.” Ultimately, this proved to be the final conflagration that ignited the anger of the masses. But such fires had been burning continuously from the Wuhan lockdown onward, already experienced in the lockdowns in Nanjing and Yangzhou in 2021, and again visible in the disregard for the desperate suicides of residents during the Shanghai lockdowns earlier in 2022, not to mention in the tragedy of the innumerable people who died because they were unable to access medical care during a sudden illness. 2022 was a year of collective trauma across the country: On [September 18th](#), 27 people died when a bus overturned in Guizhou; on [November 1st](#), a 3-year-old child in Lanzhou died of carbon monoxide poisoning after lockdown protocols hindered first responders; on [November 11th](#), after Shenzhen University had been closed for a month, unreasonable arrangements drove a campus janitor to jump to her death; on [November 18th](#), a migrant worker in Guangzhou hanged herself after testing positive for COVID-19 and being sent to a makeshift hospital for isolation; and on [November 21st](#), a fire at a factory in Anyang, Henan led to the deaths of 38 people (most of them female workers)....[11] It is nearly impossible for us to record all the humanitarian tragedies suffered under the lockdowns, since each day saw more and more emerge in all parts of the country—these were collective wounds suffered by the whole populace, to which everyone was witness. As the sign of one protestor from Northwest University of Political Science and Law read: “It was I who was on the overturned bus, it was I who was refused medical service, it was I who broke down and jumped off the roof, it was I who was trapped in the fire. And even if these were not me, I will be next.”

Economic and Livelihood Crises

From the state’s perspective, the last three years of lockdowns seem to have done a good job of

reducing the disruption to economic life caused by the coronavirus. But it's obvious that this isn't exactly the case, with 2022 seeing the proliferation of unemployment, layoffs and financial disputes spreading to such an extent that consumption has remained overall weak, all signaling a budding crisis for people's livelihoods. On the one hand, the main forms of financial relief offered by the government during the pandemic have focused on providing tax cuts and social insurance subsidies to companies, with workers hardly receiving any economic assistance from the government, forced to rely only on themselves.[12] On the other hand, the prolonged unpredictability and suddenness of the lockdowns ensured that the incomes of both service and manufacturing workers were unstable. Meanwhile, the number of unemployed was prone to sudden increases and a portion of workers were forced to enter the informal economy, taking on jobs in sectors like food delivery.[13] Both the long-running, compartmentalized lockdowns and evolving, algorithmic exploitation by capital prevented workers from obtaining stable incomes. Though it is unfortunately difficult to find accurate unemployment figures, two public data sources provide some hint at the urgency of the situation. One is the sudden increase in the rate of unemployment among youth and the rate of recent graduates unable to find work. In July of 2022, official government data showed the unemployment rate among urbanites 16-24 years old to be 19.9%, while the media [reported](#) that as of March 2022, only 23.61% of recent graduates nationwide had found work. Furthermore, the government's initial GDP growth target of 5.5% was unable to be met, with growth over the first three quarters amounting to a [mere 3%](#) and new coronavirus outbreaks making [higher] GDP growth impossible in the fourth quarter.[14] For many workers, unemployment or loss of income has been the inevitable economic cost of these lockdown politics.

Thus, even before the outbreak of the White Paper Protests on November 26th-27th, for at least the [half year prior to November](#), protests against the lockdown had been continuously breaking out in urban villages and across migrant worker communities more generally, with migrants tearing down quarantine fencing and placing "livelihood demands" at the center of such struggles. This was especially evident in a [November 14th](#) protest by as many as a thousand migrant workers in Kangle Village in Guangzhou, and in the large-scale protests at the Zhengzhou Foxconn plant on [November 22nd and 23rd](#). The ripple of urban village protests would also continue even after the White Paper Protests were beaten back.

Widespread Pandemic Fatigue and Increasing Lack of Trust in the Government

The legitimacy crisis of social governance in China had already been brewing prior to the pandemic. In recent years, the frailty of economic development and the uncertainty of upward mobility had already begun to confront workers (both blue-collar and white-collar) with the urgent pressures of survival. Emergent popular discourses—ranging from "corporate slavery" (👤) to "involution" (👤), from "lying flat" (👤) to "runology" (👤), or even talk of "the final generation" (👤👤👤)—all represent the passive resistance of a new generation of youth faced with the extreme inequality of distribution in capitalism, with each year's newest bit of cultural vocabulary simply representing the steady progress of despair. These multifaceted social crises have met with no official response. Instead, they have been uniformly rejected or stigmatized as the "influence of foreign powers" and thereby suppressed by refusing dialog and demonization, making the dictatorial character of public authority even clearer to the populace. This was clear in a number of occurrences over the past few years: the [death](#) at Chengdu No. 49 Middle School, [Xianzi's](#) #Metoo case, the [chained woman](#) of Feng county and subsequent imprisonment of the [blogger](#) [Wuyi] who was investigating the case, and the [Tangshan](#) restaurant attack.

Moreover, the political awakening of ordinary people that began with the abolition of term limits

from the constitution in 2018 was truly ignited by the [Sitong Bridge incident](#) on the eve of the 20th Party Congress. Although evidence of the brave and lonely protest was erased from cyberspace in the blink of an eye and the individual who unfurled the banner was soon after disappeared, the widespread shouting of his slogan “I don’t want a nucleic acid test, I want freedom”[\[15\]](#) in the White Paper Protests made clear that this oppositional political consciousness had quietly taken root in the minds of the people nonetheless. This new picture of popular political revolt had already been drawn before the pandemic, with all secondary harm caused by the inhumane manner of the lockdown and the ensuing economic livelihood crisis merely intensifying the public’s lack of trust in the entire system. Furthermore, not only did the expected loosening of pandemic restrictions in the wake of the 20th Party Congress fail to happen, but restrictions were gradually tightened across the country, dashing the hopes of the people. The new “[20 Measures](#)” released by the State Council embodied the tension between lockdown and opening, giving rise to numerous conflicts between local and central policies that foreshadowed the subsequent wave of anti-lockdown protests.

Why “Three Movements”?

The November 24th Ürümchi fire sparked large-scale local protests against the city’s lockdown the following day. Soon, grief and indignation over the event had begun to spread widely online and, by the afternoon of November 26th, vigils in which protestors held sheets of blank white paper had spread to a college campus in Nanjing then, by the evening, to Urumqi Street in Shanghai, unleashing the tide of White Paper Protests that soon spread across the entire country and even to Chinese people worldwide. For a brief period over the weekend, students at over 200 universities located all across the country protested on campus, citizens took to the streets in more than a dozen large cities, and, soon after, the Chinese communities scattered across hundreds of cities all across the world held thousands of protests in solidarity, echoing the calls of protestors on the mainland.

This tide of protests that took the white paper as their emblem had soon moved on from merely “resisting lockdowns” to advancing even more extreme political demands. In so doing, it appeared to be a coherent, nationwide political movement that spanned regions and social strata. But, in essence, it was actually a mixture of three parallel movements: first, the struggles of the working class; second, the struggles of urbanites, students, and professionals; and third, campaigns involving those in the new generation of overseas Chinese diaspora communities. However, in disaggregating these three movements, my intent is not to stress their independence, but precisely to emphasize the ways that they were mutually intermixed. Meanwhile, the tension of their parallel coexistence can help us to understand both the complexity and the limits of the recent wave of protests.

When the white paper is cited as the emblem of the whole movement (both within China and overseas) discussions about the movement in its entirety become solely oriented around the political protests of urbanites and students, or to the solidarity campaigns held in overseas Chinese communities, but this narrative ignores entirely the struggles happening among migrant workers and within urban villages. Why should the role of working-class resistance be taken seriously? We cannot ignore the experience of the Foxconn workers’ struggle in inspiring the entire movement that followed. At the end of October, loss of control over a coronavirus outbreak at the Foxconn facility in Zhengzhou led workers to scale the factory walls in a “great escape.” Then, at the end of November, the company’s failure to pay promised signing bonuses for new hires triggered violent confrontations with factory management and riot police involving tens of thousands of workers. In contrast to the long-standing lack of visibility suffered by workers’ actions in defense of rights,[\[16\]](#) innumerable videos and images depicting these two conflicts were spread across platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou at a phenomenal speed, with the image of workers resisting violent lockdowns and capitalist exploitation resonating with nearly everyone—corruption, confusion, and inhuman

treatment were all collective experiences.

To a certain degree, the direct action of the Foxconn workers provided an important resource for the subsequent wave of White Paper Protests—slogans were no longer merely listened to online but given voice in the streets. In fact, protests by workers against lockdowns were something like a connective thread running through the entirety of 2022. According to incomplete statistics gathered by the “China Dissent Monitor,”[17] in the period between June and the advent of the White Paper Movement there had already been nearly 80 anti-lockdown protests, most of which occurred within urban villages or other working-class districts. Workers have been the most susceptible group under the pandemic, with both the immaterial threat of the virus and the material crisis in their livelihoods compelling them to protest. This is also why many places have seen the ripple of worker demonstrations continue even after the White Paper Movement was beaten back.[18]

The Xinjiang fire was clearly the last straw, pushing people’s anger over the threshold. Their indignation then became publicly visible in the vigils held by urbanites, professionals, and students in the streets of major cities and on college campuses. In fact, this wave of simultaneous and spontaneous resistance offers a systematic representation of the political problems of the lockdown in its entirety: the collective trauma of the pandemic and its secondary disasters, the structural political-economic dilemma posed by the crisis in people’s livelihoods, the rupture opened by workers’ anti-lockdown protests, the dashed expectations that followed the 20th Party Congress and the tension that ensued, and the politicized discourse furnished by the Sitong Bridge Protest. Altogether, these became the crucial resources mobilized by participants in the wave of protests that then swept across the cities and university campuses. This was precisely the context in which the solidarity movement among the new generation of the Chinese diaspora entered into another phase. With students composing the bulk of these new overseas Chinese communities, the last several years have seen them undergo a process of rapid radicalization. The repeal of term limits in 2018 instigated a small-scale “#NotMyPresident” protest poster campaign on overseas college campuses. Then the Sitong Bridge protest on the eve of the 20th Party Congress earlier this year spawned another wave of protest posters on overseas campuses. The scale of this wave was enormous, with Sitong Bridge slogans seemingly visible at every major university in the world. The outbreak of the White Paper Movement across China’s major urban centers then triggered a similarly large-scale mobilization within these overseas Chinese communities, which spontaneously organized or participated in local, in-person protests. This sort of overseas solidarity campaign had not been witnessed at anything like this scale in the entire three decades since 1989.

Within this wave of protests, the overseas solidarity campaigns and the domestic White Paper Protests echoed one another, but these two movements’ different compositions and agendas, and their tensions regarding political demands, inevitably determined the different roles that each would play within the broader oppositional wave of China. This is why we distinguish the relationship between the two here. Similarly, we could further subdivide the domestic anti-lockdown protests into those in which workers composed the main body and those in which urbanites or students composed the main body. This is not at all to compartmentalize the relationship between the two, but instead to remind participants of the essential assets and sources of inspiration that long-standing mobilizations among workers have provided to popular struggles in China—social inequality rooted in the economic system has always been the driving force of any political movement—and at the same time to stress the resilient character of worker struggles and the necessity of solidarity with them (as explored below). Moreover, within this wave of protests, these two currents of struggle have not been completely separated in time or place. One important example of this fact was how, throughout the afternoon and evening of November 27th, tens of thousands of individuals in Wuhan, including both migrant workers and urbanites, came together to tear down fences set up along the streets.

The Revolutionary Character of the Wave of Anti-Lockdown Protests

Now that the larger wave of anti-lockdown protests has died down after the government's sudden "[tangping](#)-style" reversal of policy, the authorities have followed their usual pattern and initiated a post-autumn reckoning with participants in the demonstrations. Considering that it disappeared in a flash upon reaching its peak without changing the political structure in any way, I don't think it's necessary to elevate this movement to a "revolutionary" status, although such narratives helped it to spread internationally. But we do need to discuss its revolutionary or perhaps progressive character in more depth.

Much ink has been spilled over the long-standing radical tradition of China's working-class resistance. From the wave of collective rights-defense[19] among the millions of state-sector workers laid off in the 1990s, to the wildcat strikes among migrant "peasant-workers" fighting for [the establishment and enforcement of] lawful rights under the market economy since the early 2000s (especially around the year 2010), it became common for workers to seal off factory gates, march on the streets, block highways and so on. The marginalized status of workers and the state's particularly sensitive perception and forceful repression of the labor movement[20] combined to conceal such resistance from view of the broader populace for many years. This time, however, the rebellion of Foxconn workers resounded throughout Chinese society, providing raw material for the White Paper Protests and again demonstrating that China's future oppositional movements must regard the labor movement as a core component.

It's not that movements staffed primarily by urbanites and students have not existed since 1989, but the politicization collectively expressed in the anti-lockdown protests revealed an entirely new horizon. Most urban struggles have previously consisted of collective actions focused on specific issues, such as the environmental demonstrations against paraxylene factories in Xiamen and Maoming in 2007 and 2014, the collective rights-defense by parents calling for "fair education" in Shenzhen and Kunshan in 2016, the cultural preservation protests to "[support Cantonese](#)" in Guangzhou in 2010, or the small, inconsequential struggles by scattered individuals from the Democracy Movement and rights-defense milieus. In the White Paper Protests, most participants' direct demands still centered on opposing the strict lockdown measures, but political slogans emerging from the crowds—"down with Xi Jinping," "freedom of the press," "freedom of speech"—resonated with other participants and elicited cheers.

The Sitong Bridge protests may have been the spark that gave birth to these political slogans, but it was not at all the origin of this qualitative shift. Several years ago (before the pandemic), we could already see in online discourse that middle-class or educated groups were becoming more and more desperate with regard to the prospects for upward mobility and the accumulation of wealth, visible in discourses ranging from "corporate slavery" to "lying flat" to "runology" all revealing an ever-greater loss of faith in the political-economic system—to the point that the state found it necessary to employ its propaganda apparatus in denunciation of such anti-capitalist "rubbish." In the past, however, these frustrations had never really transformed into acts of resistance. The White Paper Protests in the cities thereby confirmed that a qualitative shift of a revolutionary nature had taken place, at least to a certain degree. At present, we can't necessarily predict how future mass movements in China will organize or develop, but this one has at least opened up a newly politicized imagination, completely overturning the mobilizational models of previous urban struggles centered on rights-defenders and isolated, depoliticized demands.

The solidarity actions in hundreds of cities and universities around the world broke through the Democracy Movement's traditional protest model post-'89, of party-style campaigns and lobbying centered on political leaders, instead forming a new type of oppositional politics with mainland

students living overseas at its core. In the past, China's traditional overseas Democracy Movement has been subject to severe denunciations. This sort of political advocacy—dominated by overseas Democracy Movement leaders and emphasizing directly oppositional stances, all strongly infused with patriarchal and conservative tendencies—is completely incapable of uniting and organizing the broad mass of the Chinese diaspora, to say nothing of connecting with domestic social issues and cross-class collectivities—even driving the younger generation to intentionally steer clear of them. But when it came to the overseas support for the White Paper Protests, the core organizers who set the agenda and mobilized participants consisted chiefly of young members of the diaspora who sought to support the movement in China and actively participate in dialogue with various overseas civil society organizations in order to magnify the impact and the progressive character of the solidarity protests.

Moreover, in many places (such as New York, London, Toronto and Vancouver) the solidarity protests not only mobilized a great deal of slogans and signage that addressed diverse issues concerning women, sexual minorities, workers, Xinjiang, etc., but the ways the events were organized also strengthened the respect for diverse groups and issues—especially evident in the attention given to the concentration camps in Xinjiang. After the movement had erupted in multiple cities, overseas Chinese students came up with four relatively moderate demands based on the domestic protests in a bid to lend focus to the movement:

- Permit open displays of mourning,
- End the Zero-COVID policy,
- Release the rights-defenders,
- Protect civil rights.

These moderate demands sought to widen the space in which protestors in China could safely engage in struggle, so they did not have a strongly politicized character, demonstrating the fact that the overseas solidarity protests were fundamentally oriented around the domestic movement. But as discussions among the overseas Chinese groups increased participants' level of education about the Xinjiang issue, the plight and voices of Uyghurs—as those most affected by the Ürümchi fire, itself the movement's starting point—began to be highlighted in the rallies, so the overseas protestor groups added a fifth demand to the list: “End racial persecution” or “Close the concentration camps in Xinjiang.”

Though for now this series of progressive new practices is possibly unable to represent the entirety of the overseas solidarity movement, such progressive mobilization and proposals linked to issues within China are clearly giving shape to a new oppositional politics among the diaspora.

The Limitations of the Wave of Anti-Lockdown Protests

Returning to our core questions: How should we understand and respond to the limitations of this wave of anti-lockdown protests, and how should we regard its rapid dissolution? This is also why we need understand it as divided into three movements. Even if it started off as a cross-class, interregional movement with shared demands in opposition to the lockdowns, upon eruption, its subsequent development and mobilization splintered into three entirely different modalities, and this was precisely the source of its predicament.

In the course of its subsequent development, the movement of urbanites and students based in city squares and universities basically stopped forging ties with the revolts in working-class neighborhoods. This is not to deny the value of the former's politicization or radicalization, but instead to highlight how this separation demonstrated the total lack of an effective infrastructure for

crossing the boundaries between groups and social strata within contemporary China's popular movements as a whole.

This wave of protests did display a revolutionary facet of China's new popular revolts, but it failed to provide a substantial solution for the long-standing fragmentation and isolation of civil society as a whole. Since 2013, civil society and NGOs have suffered ever heavier losses, with most of their social networks now disintegrated, all while the entire repressive apparatus has been continuously improved and strengthened. Even if the current social crisis continues and grows more aggravated, there is no infrastructure for interactive dialogue or political mobilization between groups. In mutually independent local struggles, groups may still be able to absorb movement resources from each other, but without dialogue between or even within groups, and without interactive mechanisms for coordination—especially if there is no interaction between educated urbanites and the working class—there is no way for each to echo the other or to get involved in political dialogue as a sustainable organizational force. Thus, when the authorities employ mature and highly targeted repressive apparatuses, the movement as a whole cannot expect to survive for long.

The lack of political infrastructure and social networking is not a problem that only recently emerged in this wave of protests. But if we hope in the future to continue forward within the new political landscape opened up by this movement, it is necessary for all participants to seriously face and reflect upon the plight of civil society infrastructure, and attempt to build domestic networks for coordination and dialogue across social strata, while also opening up new practices of solidarity abroad—otherwise, although China will never lack for protests, it will be hard for society to cohere into movements capable of transforming the era. In the coming politicized movements, then, attention must be focused on the problem of constructing civil society infrastructure: how social networks along with a system of dialogue/coordination across social strata can be built up within domestic civil society that are no longer centered on NGOs (which have become seriously repressed and limited).

This article's emphasis on the importance of working-class mobilization stems not from wishful, unilateral considerations of moralism or tactics, but from consideration of the history of radical resistance by Chinese migrant workers and the underlying capitalist system of unfair social distribution that it illuminates. Without attention to livelihood issues and working-class mobilization and alliances, it will be hard for any Chinese revolt to overcome the repressive apparatus and statist hegemony consciousness that has become ever more consolidated, and thereby to form an effective aggregate movement.

In addition, the organizational work of supporting and strengthening the new generation of Chinese diaspora will become the core of future overseas solidarity mobilizations. Although this overseas solidarity movement has broken free from the Democracy Movement's traditional model of mobilization and advocacy, opening up new directions for progressive exploration, the predicament remains: The new diaspora communities centered on Chinese international students lack experience living in China and have few ties with movement groups there. Meanwhile, there are clear political tensions between the situation in China, on the one hand, and overseas mobilizational paradigms and discursive frameworks, on the other. Thorny questions remain concerning how these overseas communities should define themselves in relation to struggles in China. This was one of the central reasons that the overseas Democracy Movement of the 1989 generation grew further and further apart from domestic movements. Especially within the current international environment of opposition between China and powerful Western nations, a key predicament facing these new overseas communities is how to decrease their dependence on foreign political parties and avoid top-down models of advocacy while simultaneously providing sufficient grassroots empowerment to Chinese groups both in China and abroad.

At present, it's hard to determine how a truly effective overseas solidarity movement should develop, but at least this wave of protests raised another new question: How should overseas communities build solidarity movements which are staffed by the new generation of progressive Chinese activists, centered on domestically salient issues within China, and which emphasize the development of relationships with both movements in China and civil society groups abroad?

Zuoyue

December 23, 2022

Notes

[1] Another mainland left analysis of these events worth noting is "November: Preview of a Revolution" ([11月月“暴动”的预演](#)) by Wuyun (吴云), first published on the "Liberation News" (解放新闻) Telegram channel in early December. Like Zuoyue, Wuyun classifies the November struggles into three types, but uses a different approach that includes overseas protests within the symbolic White Paper Protests and distinguishes the Foxconn labor struggle from the direct actions against specific lockdown measures by various lower strata of urban residents. Wuyun's article also differs from Zuoyue's left-liberal account in presenting a Maoist perspective, with Maoism by far the most widespread current of the mainland left (although mainland Maoists are internally divided into multiple warring factions). Reading the two articles alongside one another can provide a sense of the spectrum of positions on the November events adopted by the mainland left. (We have not yet found substantial accounts from other mainland left currents such as anarchists, Trotskyists, or those who often call themselves simply "internationalists." Those we've talked to say this is either because they and their comrades are still in police custody, busy organizing funerals for grandparents killed by covid after the Great Unlocking, or, like us, they're still sorting through the wreckage and trying to clarify exactly what happened.) Below is our translation of one relevant paragraph from Wuyun's article: 'The nationwide protests and struggles that erupted on November 23 can be roughly divided according to their situations into the following three types: The first was the Foxconn workers' struggle, an intense conflict that the workers carried out independently against capitalists and police, demanding that Foxconn honor the economic promises it had made when it hired them, and that it provide economic compensation to the new hires who were unwilling to stay at the factory. Although the workers actually fought against the joint arrangements of the capitalists and the bureaucratic government, the struggle was not directed toward the state itself. The second type consisted of the struggles everywhere demanding an end to the lockdowns of urban living spaces. Their participants included the intermediate strata of urbanites living in urban residential compounds, but were dominated by workers in the urban villages, fighting in alliance with the lower strata of bosses and homeowners. These struggles targeted local governments, with intense clashes between police and working-class residents breaking out in Guangzhou's urban villages, for example. The third type consisted of the protests by liberals and university students with democratic ideas, involving the political slogans of liberalism and democratism.'

[2] Among these English accounts, we recommend "[Uyghurs in Ürümchi in protest](#)" by Darren Byler (China Project, December 8); "[Wulumuqi Road](#)" by Chris Connery (Made in China, December 8); "[The Uprising in China](#)" by Yun Dong (Spectre, November 30); "[Escape from the Closed Loop](#)" by Eli Friedman (Boston Review, November 27); and "[China in Protest](#)" by various authors (China File, November 29). Among Chinese sources, in addition to the articles by Zuoyue and Wuyun, we also recommend browsing the relevant channels on [Initium](#) (启点), [NGOCN](#), [CDT](#), and [Matters](#), listening to the interviews on episodes [27](#) & [29](#) of 启点 podcast, and watching the videos on 启点. If you can recommend other sources, please post in the comments or email us at chuangcn.riseup.net.

[3] Several friends and comrades have been discussing this article in their respective circles, and

one response was just published yesterday, elaborating on questions raised in the piece: [“疫情”下的中国](#) by Zuowang 作王 (NGOCN, January 18).

[4] Another lens that some readers have noted is the particular set of sources the article uses, which report the highest-range estimates of the number and spread of protests (explained in footnotes below), and tend to overestimate the mutual influence exerted by an array of scattered events. Concrete occurrences on the ground are conflated with the most prominent scandals of 2022 that appeared in the news-stream of the activist left (mainly circulating outside the Great Firewall and thus unknown to those who decided to riot in China’s urban villages, for example). This accounts for some of the equations offered in the analysis, where disparate forms of discontent are summoned as evidence of a slowly building resistance of the people against Zero-COVID policy and eventually the whole political system.

[5] Some observers have questioned whether the Foxconn riot was part of the anti-lockdown movement. We might go further and ask whether even the white paper protests and the direct actions against specific Zero-COVID measures themselves constituted such a movement, together or separately. Participants in both types of resistance seem to have shared some kind of opposition to Zero-COVID (which involved many other features besides “lockdowns” as normally understood in English: the elderly being forced by “big whites” to relocate to unsanitary quarantine facilities while being denied medical care, the literal padlocking of people into their buildings which led to the deaths that sparked the white paper protests, etc.). When Zero-COVID was not singled out as the enemy, participants pushed for local implementation of the central government’s “20 Measures” to mitigate the policy’s most brutal consequences. Rarely did anyone express opposition to lockdowns in general, as a matter of principle, in a way comparable to the politicized “anti-lockdown” protests in other countries. As mentioned in Zuoye’s piece, on the few occasions when white paper protestors articulated broader demands and slogans, these aimed for institutional changes that would enable “citizens” to have more say in policymaking (potentially including more reasonable lockdown policies—as at least a few protest-supporters have expressed since Beijing’s disastrous policy-reversal on December 7) . The proletarian direct actions, on the other hand, were aimed at specific livelihood demands (also pointed out in the article), including things like: provide us with the food and medical supplies you promised; let me out of my flat so I can go to work and see a doctor; let me go home so I can see my family, etc. Their content and especially their forms of resistance—as well as their isolation from other social strata, including the white-paper protestors—echoed many other struggles in the sphere of reproduction that proletarians have waged in China’s urban villages and industrial districts periodically since at least the 2000s (explored in our articles [“No Way Forward, No Way Back”](#) and [“Picking Quarrels,”](#) for example). All this suggests that these actions express deeper problems related to the longer-term crisis of social reproduction, which was only exacerbated by Zero-COVID. (This possibility is explored in Eli Friedman’s article [“Escape from the Closed Loop.”](#))

[6] Listen, for example, to the interviews with white paper protesters on the [Bumingbai](#) podcast, and read those in several of [Initium’s reports](#) and those on [NGOCN](#).

[7] For details on the Foxconn riots and its background, see [“The class struggle of Foxconn workers in Zhengzhou”](#) from the Maoist platform [今天](#) (“Today”), reposted on the Taiwanese platform Events in Focus ([今天](#)): [part 1](#), [part 2](#).

[8] TRANSLATORS: This is a translation of the original title [“疫情”下的中国](#).

[9] TRANSLATORS: The “Fundamental National Policies” ([基本国策](#)) are those considered to be central to the founding and rule of the country. This is not, however, an official legal category, but instead a distinction made within both official press outlets and public discourse more generally. In the past,

the category has been said to include family planning policies, equality of the sexes, reform and opening, the protection of arable land, energy efficiency, and environmental protection.

[10] TRANSLATORS: The original does not indicate the source of this figure, but Japanese bank Nomura [estimated](#) in April 2022 that almost one in three Chinese citizens was under some form of lockdown, which would bring the figure to approximately 400 million, or one third of China's population. The bank has its own model of how much of the economy is under lockdown, and it's unclear how their calculations are made. Its [estimate](#) for November was that 30 percent of China's population was under some form of lockdown. We plan to explore the dynamics of lockdowns, "high-risk areas" and the spread of Omicron throughout 2022 in relation to the various forms of unrest and the state's disastrous responses to all this in a future blog post.

[11] TRANSLATORS: Reports from the Anyang fire show that the vast majority of workers, including those who died, were elderly local people from Anyang. It was a tragedy for the community, as most people knew each other. One of the workers who was trapped was able to call her husband, who was able to bring a ladder to the site from home and help with the rescue effort. For details in English with links to several Chinese accounts, see "[Garment factory fire in Anyang takes 38 lives, injures 2](#)" (CLB, November 29).

[12] Individual cities rolled out consumption voucher policies, but these often did not result in much improvement in the situation of workers. The vouchers were small, oriented only toward certain goods, and only given out in certain cases.

[13] To take Meituan as an example: at the end of 2019, Meituan had 3.98 million registered drivers. By the end of 2020, the number of individuals receiving income from Meituan rose to 9.5 million.

[14] TRANSLATORS: China's fourth quarter GDP growth was [2.9%](#), (up from 0.4 in the first quarter but down from 3.8 in the third), so we assume the author meant "higher growth" here.

[15] The exact words on the original banner were: "We don't want nucleic acid testing, we want food to eat / We don't want lockdowns, we want freedom / We don't want lies, we want dignity / We don't want Cultural Revolution, we want reform / We don't want leaders, we want elections / We don't want to be slaves, we want to be citizens." These slogans were shouted in full in certain places during the protests, but they were also conventionally shortened to "We don't want nucleic acid testing, we want freedom." Other locales added their own innovations, as in a slogan seen in Guangzhou: "We don't want to stand around and watch, we want to participate / We don't want to lie flat, we want to go to work / We don't want to lie flat, we want to go to school."

[16] Strikes and other actions in defense of workers' rights have long existed in China, but due to censorship and repression—which have also made discussion of worker issues in general less visible—these protests have long suffered from invisibility, despite their frequency. Almost every city and industrial zone in the country has seen spontaneous and scattered protests by workers for many years.

[17] TRANSLATORS: The original relies here and in several other places on the "China Dissent Monitor," which is a product of the US-based NGO Freedom House. In our opinion, the Dissent Monitor is not an empirically or politically reliable source, and the author's reliance on this and several other questionable sources seems to be why many of the estimates (of numbers of protests, participants, etc.) are inflated throughout the piece. There are two major problems with the Dissent Monitor. First, both its methodology and its sources are entirely opaque, making it extremely difficult to fact-check. Second, and more importantly, its parent organization is a conservative NGO linked closely to US government interests. The organization receives the bulk of its funding from US

government grants and, though it receives no direct funding from the state department, it does receive money from USAID and other grant sources linked to US national security interests. More damning is the fact that the organization was founded as an anti-communist think tank during the Cold War, in which role it produced scathing criticisms of prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and their stance against the Vietnam War. In later years, Freedom House has helped set the double-standards used in various “democracy” rankings, which have little to do with democratic institutions and are instead clearly and systematically biased in favor of countries allied to US foreign policy interests.

[18] After White Paper Protests had disappeared from the public plaza in Guangzhou’s Haizhu district (around November 28th), collective protests by workers against the lockdown continued in a number of Haizhu’s urban villages, such as Lijiao Village and Houjiao Village, where workers overturned police cars and the police fired tear gas canisters and arrested a portion of the protestors in response.

[19] TRANSLATORS: “[Rights Defense](#)” (维权) refers to the practice of making appeals to (usually higher-level) authorities to ensure that the letter of the law is followed and all legally guaranteed rights and protections are implemented correctly. Though this is an accurate description of many protests in China, the portrayal of different forms of worker agitation as “rights-defense” is also often a political choice, either made to avoid censorship or as a way of intentionally obscuring more radical dimensions of any given wave of unrest under the liberal and institutionally-oriented jargon popular among civil society activists. (This is explored in the book [Rightful Resistance in Rural China](#) by Lianjiang Li and Kevin O’Brien.)

[20] TRANSLATORS: Here and elsewhere the author refers to a “labor movement” or “workers’ movement.” No mass movement of workers has existed in China since the pre-revolutionary trade union movement was incorporated into the party-state in the 1950s—with the possible [exception](#) of the defensive strikes and riots of workers in the old socialist industrial belt who were confronted with mass layoffs during the restructuring of state-owned enterprises in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Today, the frequent use of the term “[labor movement](#)” by activists usually refers to the combination of small labor activist networks (which were essentially annihilated by 2019) and the scattered, sporadic, and largely unorganized strikes and riots within the manufacturing sector that grew in force in the 2000s, peaked in the early 2010s, and receded thereafter. In texts such as this, “repression of the labor movement” mostly refers to the specific repression of activists, rather than the broader and more complex repression of various forms of proletarian agitation.

P.S.

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