

What is unique about protests in China?

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The UK National Committee on China (UKNCC) Guest Contributor Programme highlights contrasting responses, by leading authors, to key questions posed by the UKNCC. The programme is designed to stimulate a deeper exploration of China related issues; drive curiosity; and test conventional wisdom.

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Much of the world suddenly took notice of the contention that swept across Chinese cities in the aftermath of a tragic fire in Urumqi on 24 November, 2022.

While ostensibly in reaction to the local government's poor disaster response (which may have cost lives), protests quickly morphed into more generalised critiques of China's Zero-Covid policies, Xi Jinping's personalistic rule, censorship, or the Chinese political system as a whole.

Less attention had been paid to instances of mobilisation around China over the preceding 9 months, though these were frequent and on occasion quite intense. Observers, especially abroad, perceived the late November wave as distinct, surprising, and (at least to some) exhilarating. With a few months' hindsight, we can now undertake more sober and careful assessments.

Four aspects of the protests stand out: framing, boundary-spanning, responses, and influence.



Framing

For decades, scholars of social movements have emphasised the influence of cognitive templates, often carefully fashioned and deployed by individuals or organisations, in helping galvanise or motivate the public to protest. Such frames and framing processes form an important bridge between vague or unarticulated grievances and disciplined or sustained mobilisation. As I've written in the past, framing doesn't work the same way in a context like China's as it does in Europe or America.

Authoritarianism and fear of repression mean that overt protest leaders and formal social movement organisations very rarely emerge with sufficient agency to craft and disseminate frames that can spur mobilisation. Instead, 'structural frames', that are not deliberately wrought but rather are naturally resonant, are usually all Chinese protesters can muster (as we saw in the case of laid-off workers' contention, on which I focused 20 years ago).

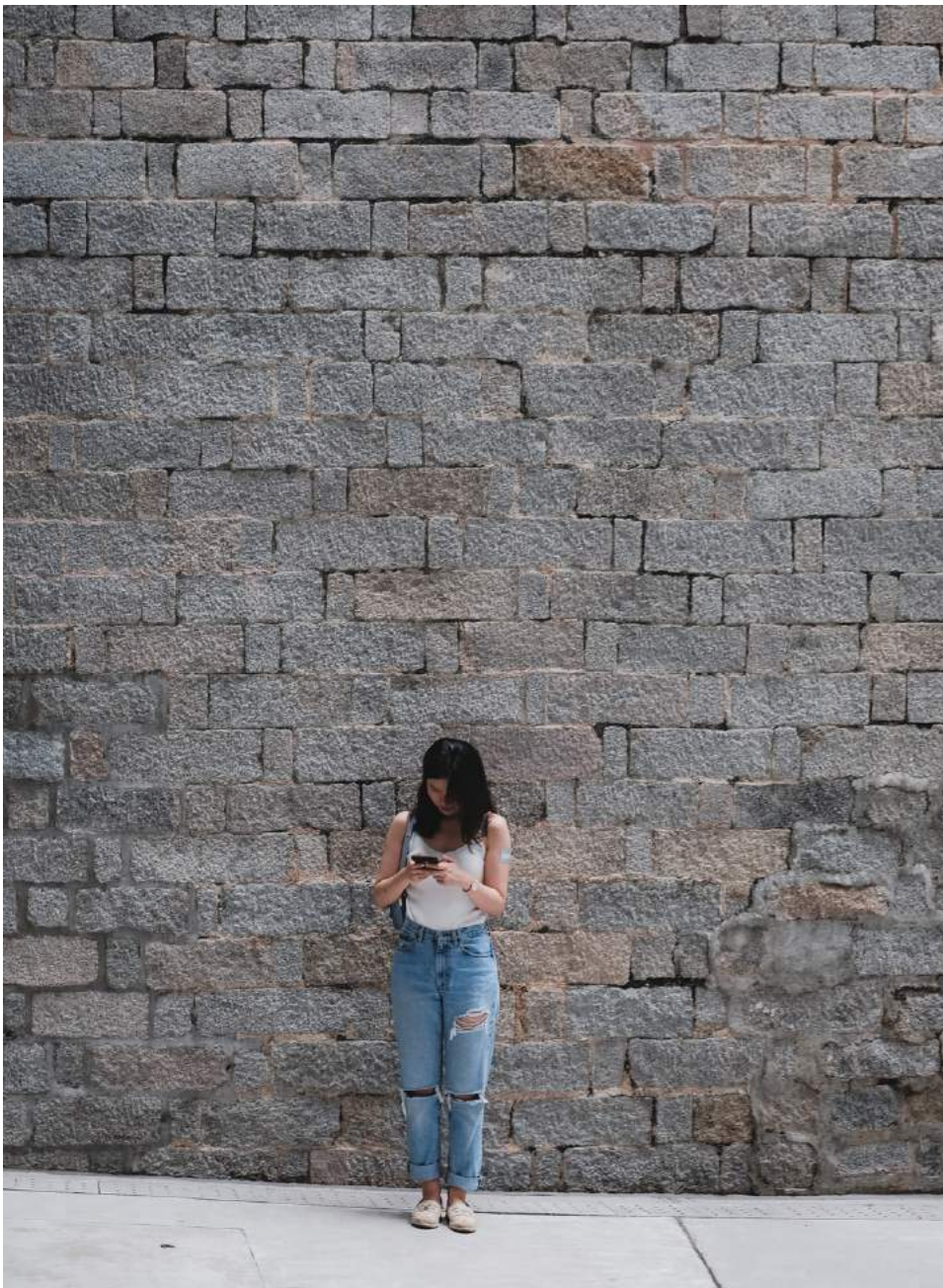
In last November's instance, we saw a very powerful set of structural master frames, rooted in outrage over the fire and exasperation with Zero-Covid, fuel more or less spontaneous contention that lasted nearly a week – before this framing began to fray and break down. Though it didn't last forever, the structural framing we witnessed last autumn was among the most strikingly successful and sustained in decades.

Boundary-spanning

Kevin O'Brien, Ching Kwan Lee, and many others have emphasised the 'cellular' nature of most Chinese mobilisation that is confined to the village, work unit, or neighbourhood. November's protests were notable because they transcended these boundaries far more comprehensively than we have seen in many years. Of course, working across the myriad boundaries that keep Chinese society intensely fragmented is extremely difficult to sustain. But the fact that it happened at all is noteworthy – not least also because a number of normally quite disparate social groups (students, urban residents, more radical activists and dissidents, and more) were able to find common cause for at least a few days.

Responses

Since 2017 (and really from 2014 on), most observers have agreed that China's leadership has progressively tightened the strings of repression and control, allowing less and less of even the most routine or unobtrusive contention, while expanding state capabilities for surveillance, suppression, and punishment of potential or actual protesters.





Most extreme in contexts like Xinjiang, this tightening has pervaded every aspect and corner of Chinese society and politics. Startlingly, however, November's protests were not resoundingly put down by authorities. Not only this, but reprisals after the fact have been relatively muted. Perhaps most astounding, evidence of government shortcomings, mobilisation, and defiance spread wildly on social media and was allowed to remain up for far longer and in far more places than most would have read as normal even just a few months earlier. It isn't exactly clear how the state's response was debated or worked out, but it definitely was a lot more lenient, restrained, and subtle than most of us would have anticipated.

Influence

Influence is frustratingly difficult to measure, especially when it comes to protests in authoritarian contexts such as China. No matter how hard we try to assess things objectively, we risk falling into dangerous assumptions of post hoc ergo propter hoc.

If ever protests did have some influence on Chinese government policy, however, the November/December round of mobilisation does appear to have played some significant part in pressing the government to loosen Zero-Covid restrictions several months earlier than previously planned. Protests do indeed appear to have influenced policy, at least far more clearly than we have usually seen, and in the direction desired by the protesters.

That said, we must be careful to steer clear of the wistful and hubristic apophenia so unabashedly on display in widely circulated claims that the seeds of democracy had been sown in China or that the protests signalled the beginning of the end for the Xi Jinping or the CCP.

While the degree to which Chinese leaders actually seem to have listened and responded to those who took to the streets in November is notable, nothing portends the rise of any sustained anti-government movement or other systemic threat to the regime.

Where does contention in China go from here?

So, what does all this add up to? Do the protests represent a sea change? Or merely a change in the winds (if even that)? In the short term, the main effect is simply that Covid policy changed a bit faster than it might have otherwise. Most of us expected China to roll back Zero-Covid starting from around March 2023, whereas policy actually began to shift from late December. Beyond the policy impact, the most important outcome from the protests probably lies in the responses of the state. Waiting out the protests from a position of relative strength and confidence, rather than abject weakness, turned out to be a winning strategy. Allowing internet videos to remain up and to spread, and even permitting protesters to organise across geographic and social boundaries, is also a decidedly new tactic for the Chinese state.

It is less obvious to me that this will last or be replicated in other issue domains. But, if it does end up being the new normal, it would be a very significant change that could actually lead to the regularisation and containment of more of the very considerable volume of contention that Chinese society sees every year.

On the whole, then, we should view the protests as an important aberration and a potential change of direction. Things could easily have unfolded much differently.

The success of anti-lockdown framing; the degree to which protesters transcended barriers between otherwise distinct segments of Chinese society; the relatively relaxed, subtle, and responsive reaction of the state; and the speed and manner with which policy was adapted and changed all were very surprising (at least to me). Mobilisation could easily have failed; protests could have erupted in one or two cities or only among certain groups of angry urban residents; the state could have repressed all the protests violently; and Xi Jinping could have doubled-down on Zero-Covid yet again. The fact that everything played out as it did may indeed signal an important shift in the dynamics of contentious politics in China – to a new reality in which protest is much lower risk, more normalised, and more likely to have an impact on policy direction and debate.

Time will tell, however. Covid and lockdown were not normal times, in China or indeed anywhere else. What happened under special circumstances may, in other words, have been a special occurrence. It will thus be especially important to watch what happens over the next year or two when Chinese citizens again engage in protests over issues beyond the exclusively parochial or intensely local.

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About the Author

William Hurst is the Chong Hua Professor of Chinese Development at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Ruling Before the Law: the Politics of Legal Regimes in China and Indonesia* (Cambridge 2018) and *The Chinese Worker after Socialism* (Cambridge 2009). He has also edited or co-edited four other books and published over two dozen peer reviewed articles and chapters and a comparable number of essays, op-eds and shorter pieces on many aspects of Chinese and Indonesian politics, international relations, and political economy. Before arriving in Cambridge, he was professor of politics at Northwestern University in the United States.



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