

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.

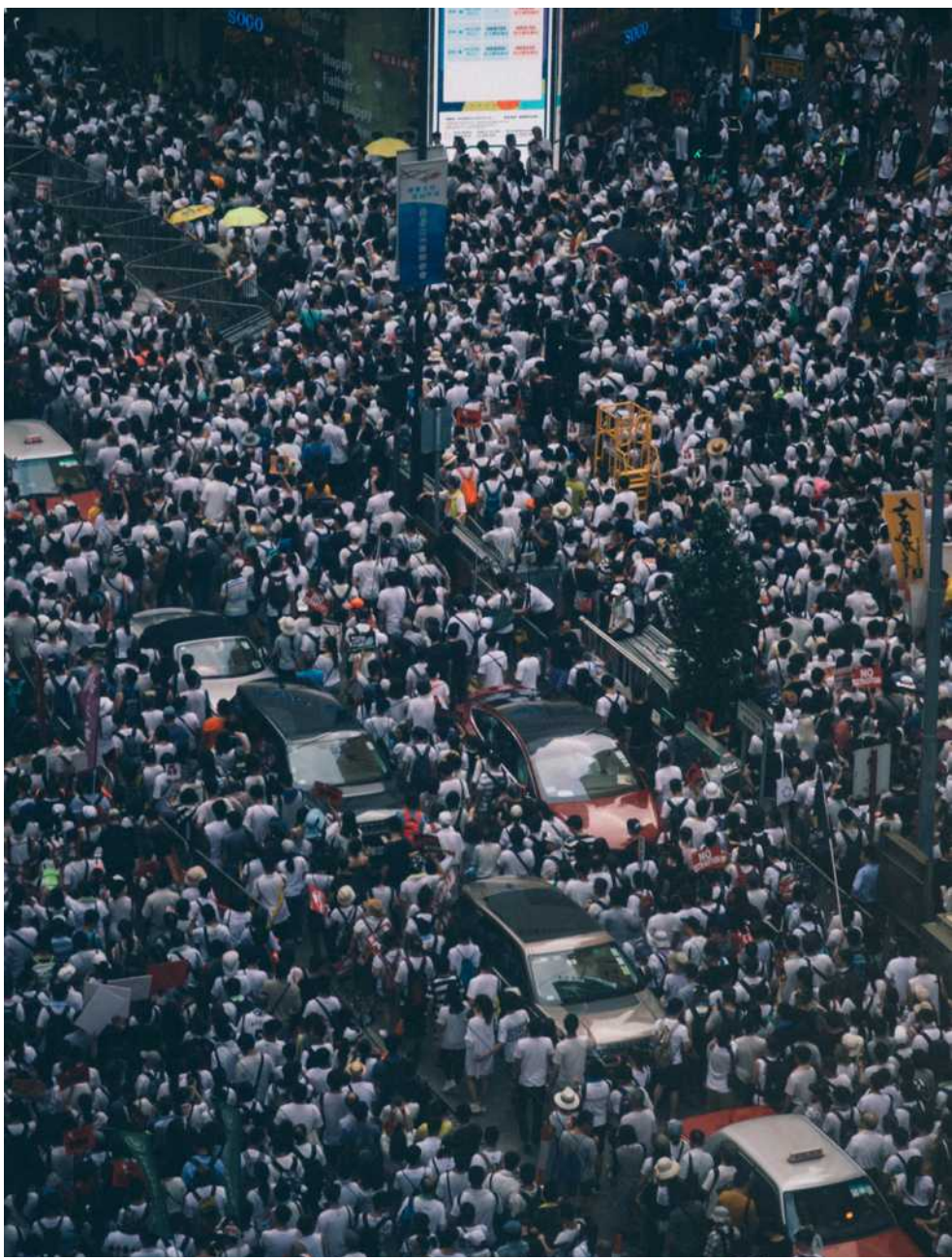
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According to Mencius, the key elements of a battle include the opportunities of time, the advantages of situation, and the accord of men. These elements also constitute the unique characteristics of modern Chinese protest, where protestors take advantage of delayed reactions by central government in order to gather in notable places and use protest as a negotiation tactic to realise their demands. The development of modern information technology has fuelled the spontaneity of these gatherings, as seen in the protests against Covid-19 restrictions. The ability of Chinese netizens to bypass firewalls and censorship so as to organise demonstrations made 2022 a turning point in the trajectory of protest in China.

Opportunities of Time

As governments rarely have a plan for dealing with sudden and unexpected protests, the time lag between receiving news of a protest and implementing countervailing action becomes a window of opportunity for protesters to gather. Hence, the spontaneity of most protests, especially in China.



The Tiananmen protests of 1989 began in April when people first gathered to mourn Hu Yaobang, a leading politician who oversaw reforms, and to voice their frustrations at the pace of reform. From late April to early May, government inaction rooted in the leadership split between reformists and hardliners gave rise to gatherings attended by more than a million people.

The students began hunger strikes on May 13th as a negotiation tactic to push for talks on political and economic reform that would reduce inflation and address corruption among the Party leaders. Indeed, conversations were had between Party leader Li Peng and student representatives.

While Li stopped the hunger strike by expressing concern for the health and demands of the students, no compromise was found in the meeting. These protests did not achieve their desired goals and were ultimately met by martial law and the use of troops.

A similar situation occurred in 1999. When the demands of Falun Gong practitioners for legal status were met with silence from central government, over 12,000 people assembled outside Zhongnanhai for a peaceful, yet political protest aimed at forcing government action.

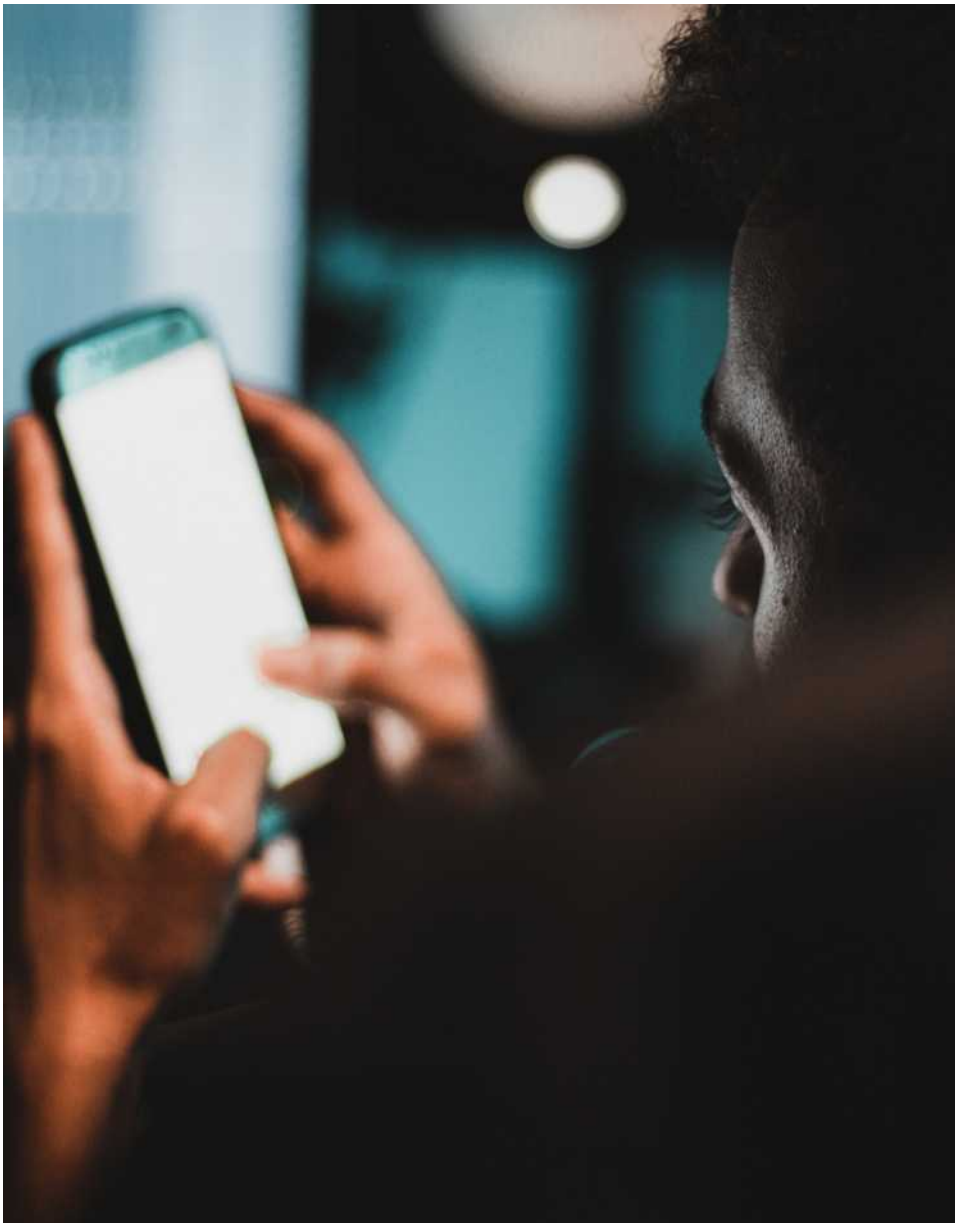
However, the practitioners did not achieve their aims through these peaceful protests, and the Chinese government soon started a purge of the group.

The 2022 protests against Covid restrictions appear to have had a more successful outcome. Early in 2020, the government moved quickly in response to Covid-19 to enforce lockdowns and control infection. Chinese citizens applauded these measures as they greatly slowed the spread of the virus and kept mortality rates low, especially compared with Europe and the US. However, as the rest of the world returned to normality, China's insistence on its "dynamic zero-Covid" policy hindered economic development and eroded social trust towards the government.

Hopes were raised in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress when it was rumoured that the Party would relax its strict policies. Yet the results were disappointing as the government maintained the same rhetoric and policies.

On November 24th, 2022, a fire broke out in an apartment building in Urumqi in north-western Xinjiang, killing ten people and wounding nine. Later, information circulated online that lockdown restrictions had prevented people from fleeing the building. A public outcry ensued.

The public reacted particularly strongly to this as it occurred soon after other tragedies caused by how Covid restrictions were implemented. These included the Shanghai lockdown and the quarantine bus which tragically crashed in Guizhou. People thought that they could be the next victim of government Covid policy.





The government's decision to censor information about the fire led younger generations living in cities like Shanghai and Beijing to organize vigils for the victims and post about them on social media. Although these posts were quickly censored, people navigated the firewalls and censorship by using edited images and euphemisms to gain momentum and demand free speech reform, and even the removal of Xi Jinping from office.

During the window of opportunity from day 1 to day 3, where police on the ground appeared indifferent to taking action against the vigils, the protesters were able to spread information about their gatherings on social media platforms domestically and abroad.

On December 7th, 2022, China announced sweeping changes to its Covid policies to lift lockdowns and ease restrictions, and it seemed that the resolute protesters and their means of protesting throughout major Chinese cities had worked as a negotiation tactic for a return to normal life.

Advantages of situation

Protests are often heavily censored in China after they happen, and thus the ability to navigate around censorship is critical for a successful assembly. The 2022 Covid protests demonstrated that the ability to bypass censors can be integral to protesters achieving their goals.

Days before the start of the 20th Party Congress in 2022, Peng Zaizhou, named the new Tank Man, unfurled a banner on Sitong Bridge in Beijing that laid out six demands, including reforming Covid policies, freedom of speech in China, and Xi's removal from office.

Although officials removed his presence from Chinese media platforms within hours, Peng was able to spread information abroad by using a VPN to mask his IP address and using platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to gain attention and avoid censorship. Similarly, for the Urumqi fire protests, students and people living in modern cities learned to use redacted phrases and words on

Chinese social media sites such as Weibo and WeChat to organize and communicate about censored events. Many protesters held up a blank A4 paper as a satirical response to the government's sweeping censorship. Posting footage and information about the demonstrations on foreign social media platforms made it difficult for the Chinese government to deny the existence of protests and contain their momentum. The extensive domestic and international attention that these demonstrations garnered led Xi to acknowledge the protests in a meeting with EU officials, signalling an unprecedented achievement for Chinese protesters and the importance of information technology.

Popular support – the 'accord of men'

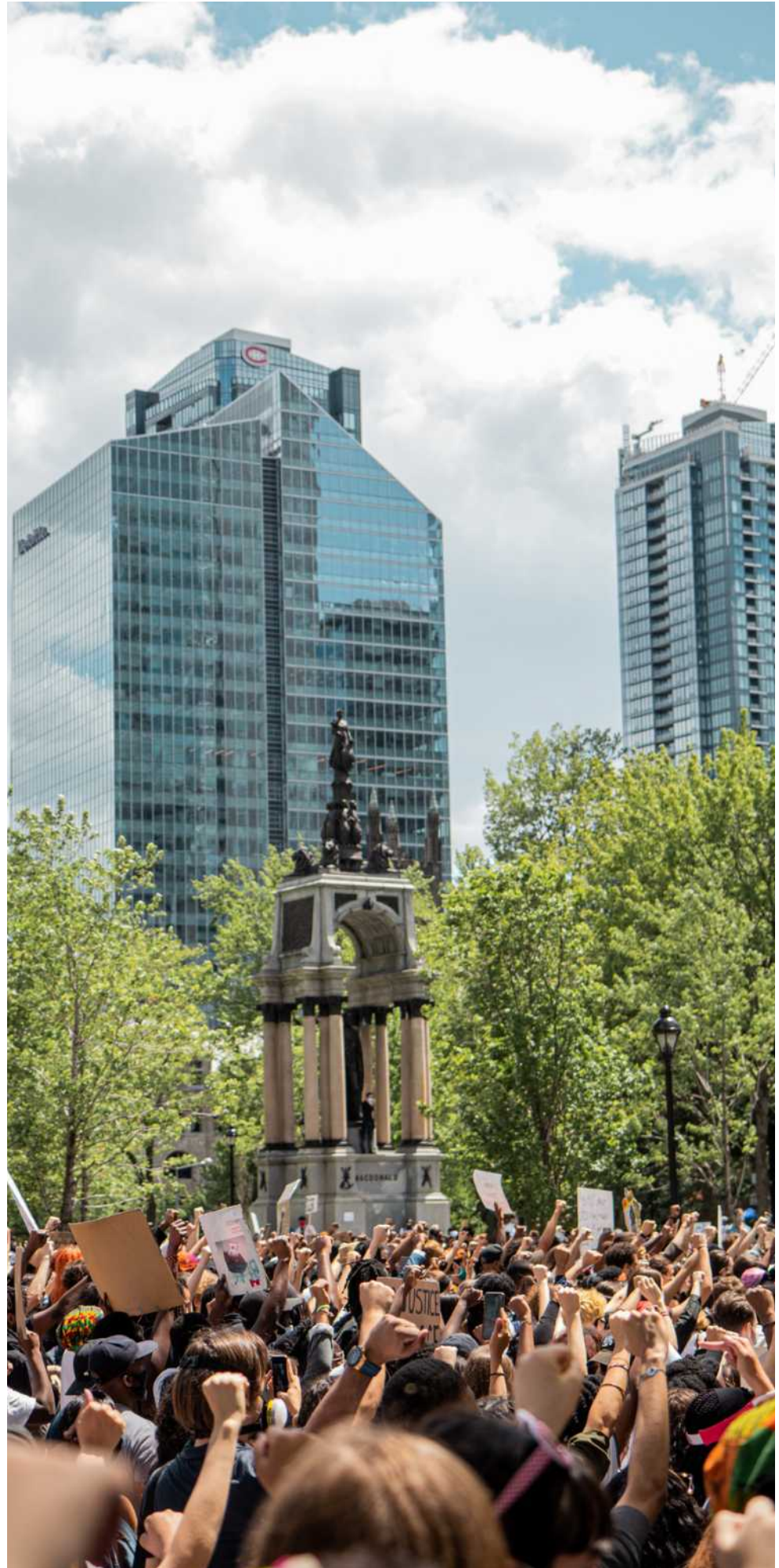
Protests are rarely successful without public support. Looking at previous mass protests in China, gatherings are usually caused by the loss of a charismatic leader or a traumatic event that threatens the lives of many, playing a role in uniting disparate groups with a common cause.

The large scale 1976 Tiananmen protests occurred when people were robbed of their chance to mourn Zhou Enlai, a widely admired premier. Thousands of people came to Tiananmen Square on the eve of Qingming Festival to leave wreaths honouring the life and work of Zhou, although some of the wreaths were also critical of the Gang of Four. Late that night, the Gang of Four removed the wreaths, because they were worried about a potential popular movement against them. When word spread about what the government had done, up to two million people assembled in the Square to protest about this and other radical actions of the leadership. Hundreds of people were arrested.

The 1989 student protest was a similar case: a million people gathered to mourn the loss of Hu Yaobang, who had played a leading role in economic reform efforts and launched China into capitalism in the wake of the scars left by Mao, and to protest at the slow pace of reforms.

The 2022 protests were sparked by the traumatic Urumqi fire incident, which made people realise that anyone could become a victim of such oppressive policies. The accumulated anger and frustration from over two years of lockdowns drove people to demonstrate in various cities in China and abroad. Unlike previous protests, their efforts and demands were more clearly heard, resulting in the opening of China to post-Covid life.

The outcome of the 2022 protests marks a turning point for the future of Chinese protest, as people have begun to leverage information technology to exert pressure on authorities both domestically and



internationally. This success demonstrates the potential effectiveness of protests as a negotiation tactic when employed at the right time, through the appropriate means, and with the right support.



About the Author

Mengyu Han is a Fourth Year majoring in Political Economy and Media Studies with a minor in Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. She previously worked for Council on Foreign Relations as the Asia Studies Intern focusing on the topic of China's rise. She is currently the research assistant at Berkeley APEC center.

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The current debate on China in the UK is too often dominated by 'hawks' and 'apologists'. This can lead to over simplification and poor decision making.

The UKNCC seeks to promote a broader, nuanced debate without entertaining extreme views or perpetuating false silos.

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