

*Concise commentary on complex issues from different points of view.*

The UKNCC Guest Contributor Programme offers contrasting 'short, sharp reads' for those seeking a fuller exploration of key questions. This issue explores:

## ***China's Belt & Road Initiative: What to expect?***

*Authors, alphabetically by surname:*

- *Mengyu Han, Research Assistant at Berkeley APEC Center, University of California, Berkeley*
- *William Hurst, Chong Hua Professor of Chinese Development, Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) Deputy Director at the Centre for Geopolitics, Cambridge University*

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## *What is unique about protests in China?*

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March 2023

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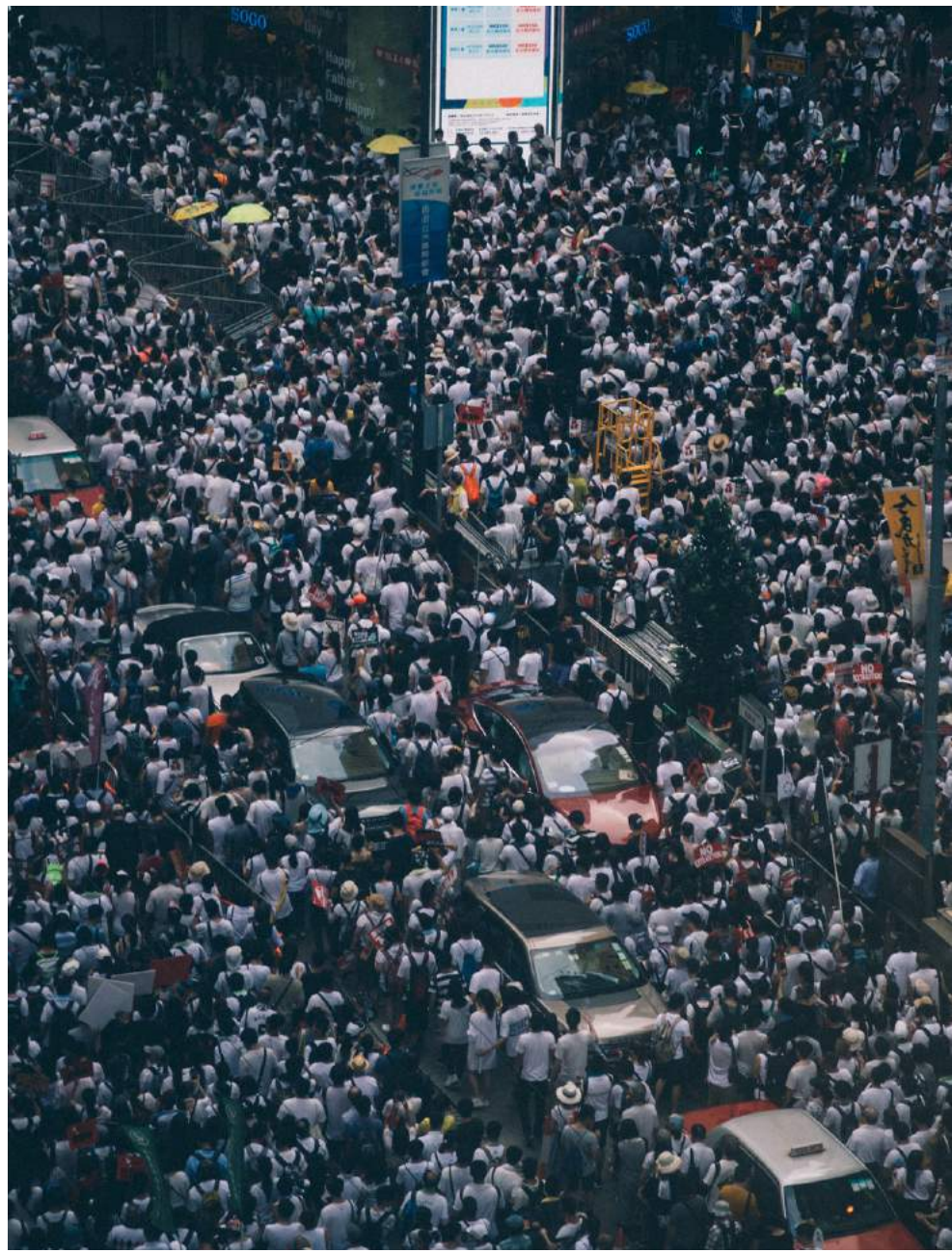
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According to Mencius, the key elements of a battle include the opportunities of time, the advantages of situation, and the accord of men. These elements also constitute the unique characteristics of modern Chinese protest, where protestors take advantage 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.

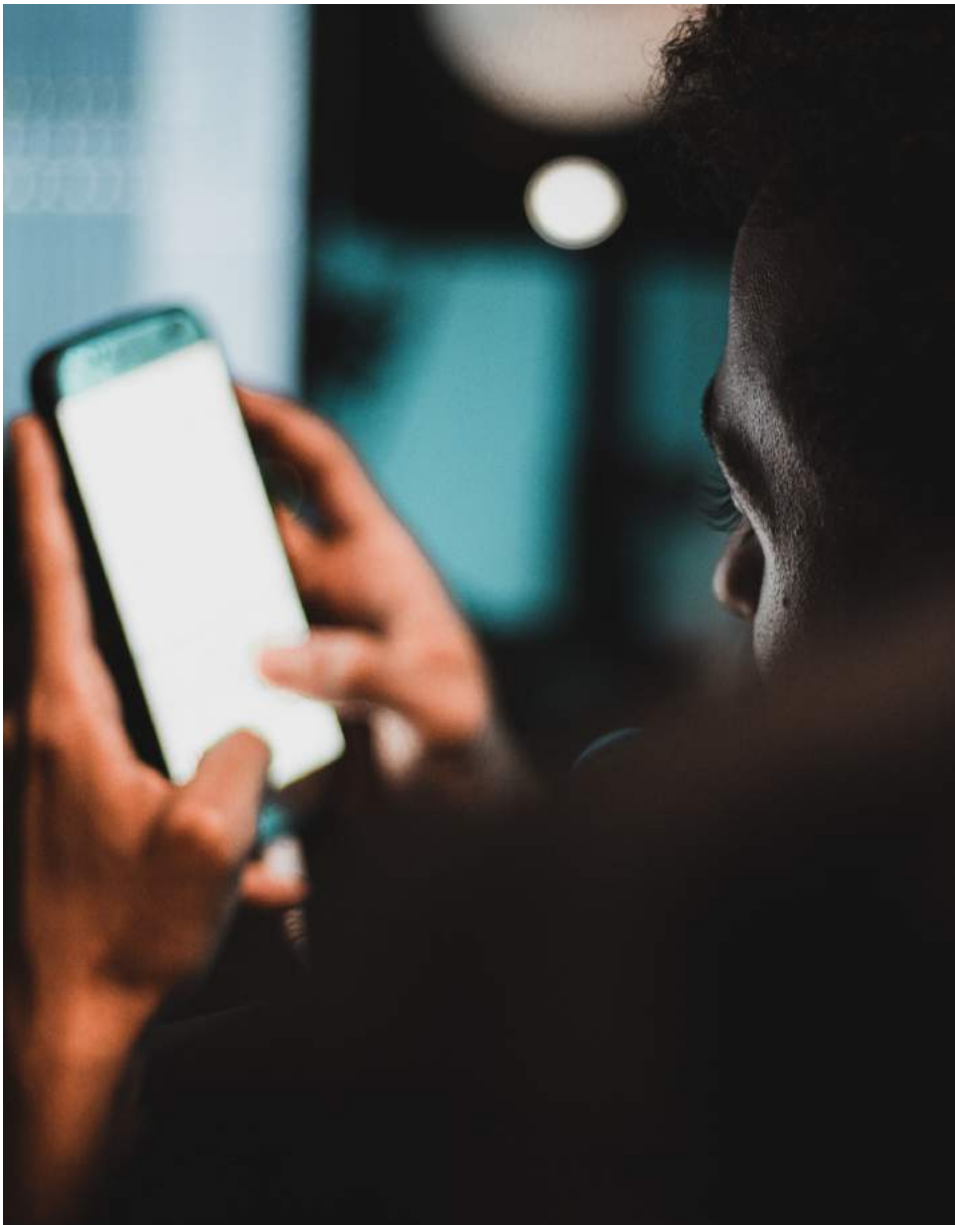
However, the practitioners did not achieve their aims through these peaceful protests, and the Chinese government soon started a purge of the group.

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

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## *What is unique about protests in China?*

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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).

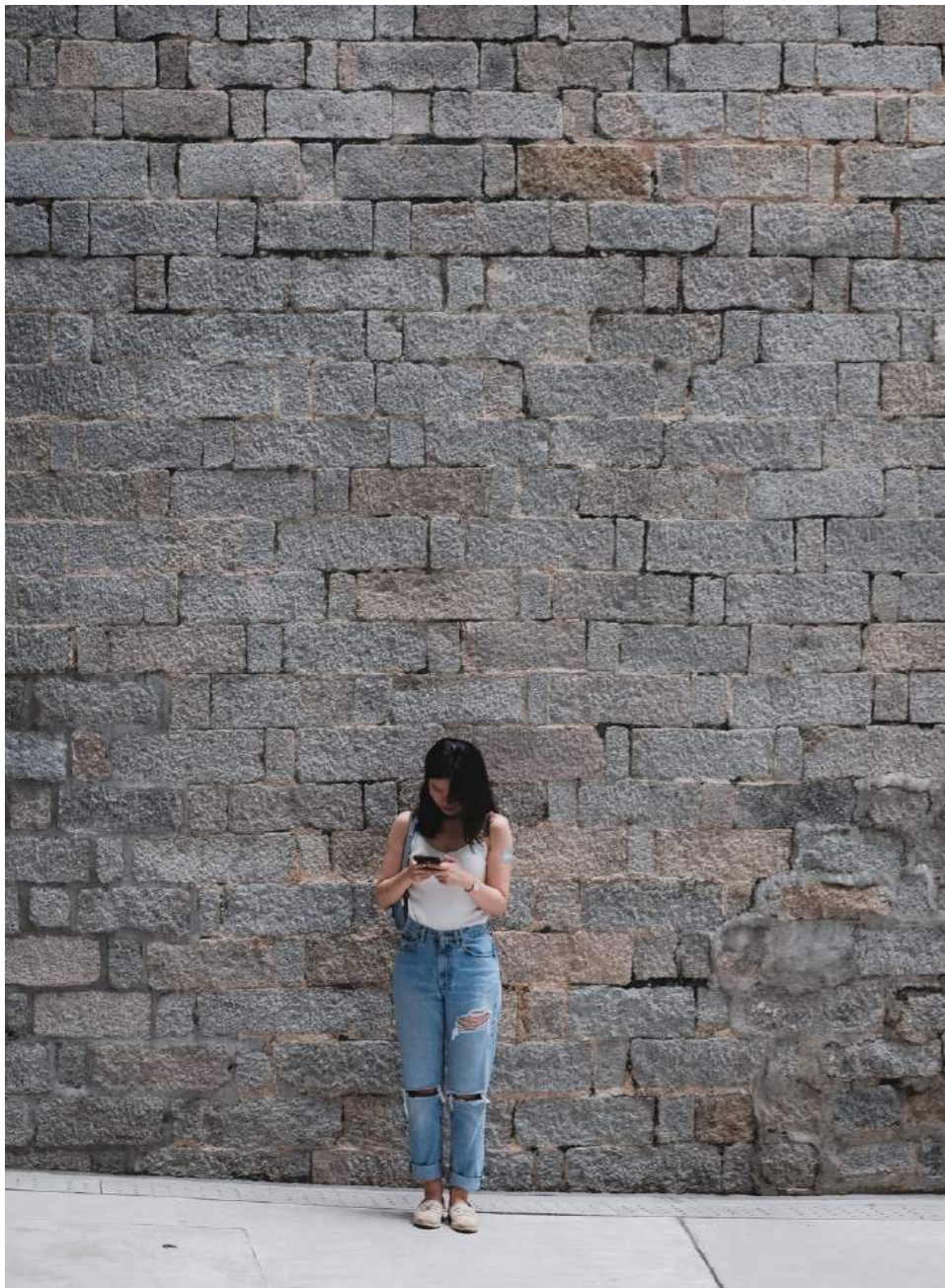
In last November's instance, we saw a very powerful set of structural master frames, rooted in outrage over the fire and exasperation with Zero-Covid, fuel more or less spontaneous contention that lasted nearly a week – before this framing began to fray and break down. Though it didn't last forever,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

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