A YEAR OF PROTESTS, CEREMONIES, AND SURPRISES

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Two things stand out to us when thinking about public protests in today's People's Republic of China (PRC). First, although it is easy for outsiders to view the PRC as having become a place so tightly controlled, surveilled, and censored that there is no room for dissent, this has never been the case — as the mass exodus of factory workers and burst of urban demonstrations that began in the second half of November 2022 reminded the world so powerfully. Even in an era when expressing dissenting opinions about key policies is hugely risky, people keep finding ways to give them voice. There is a common thread linking the protests of 2022 to the Wuhan lockdown protests of 2020: anger over official coverups and frustration with intense limitations on basic rights and freedoms and surveillance over the activities of even those who had not been directly exposed to the COVID-19 virus.

Second, even though it is also easy to imagine that the Communist Party of China (CPC) is so firmly established and has such an extensive media system that it no longer needs to mount displays aimed at impressing the populace and reinforcing themes in daily propaganda, this also is not the case. Every year without fail, there are both protests and CPC-staged ceremonies. Just as protests are intended to raise awareness of issues and rally public sentiment for change, the official spectacles are designed to propagate the notion of CPC greatness and rally people behind the party, extol the current leadership, and celebrate figures playing central roles in policies and campaigns. Following the initial citywide lockdown in Wuhan, for example, the authorities organised exhibitions across China to celebrate the efforts of frontline medical staff, framing them as the 'unsung heroes' in a glorious CPC-led fight against the pandemic.[1]

The year 2022 did not diverge from this enduring pattern. In autumn alone, before the November unrest at Foxconn and the vigils for victims of the fire in Xinjiang whose deaths protesters blamed on strict COVID-19 lockdown measures, there were marches everywhere from Lhasa in the far west to Guangzhou in the south-east and a daring solo act of defiance in Beijing, in which a lone man risked his life and liberty to hang banners from a bridge. There were also many notable state rituals in 2022 — the most

significant being those that accompanied the Twentieth Party Congress, in October, sandwiched between the Beijing protest and those in Tibet and Guangzhou.

Three Kinds of Years

Not all years are created equal when it comes to the mix of popular protests and the elite ceremonies that are designed in part to deflect expressions of discontent. While each year witnesses both, some are remembered for just one kind: 1989 was a year of protests, for example, despite lavish state ceremonies, including the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC on 1 October. In contrast, although 2015 saw many separate strikes by workers in different regions, expressions of outrage at the arrest of five feminist activists, and a protest in Tianjin by locals demanding compensation for a warehouse explosion, it was above all a year of official ceremonies. The highest-profile public event was the massive military parade in the capital that gave Xi Jinping a chance to stand beside visiting world leaders while commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II.

Most years are mixed. Take 2008: yes, it saw the glittering opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games. But there was also upheaval in Tibet, as well as expressions of anger over the high number of child deaths in the Sichuan earthquake — deaths attributed to the collapse of shoddily constructed schools, which in turn was seen as the result of corruption.

When future historians look back on 2022, as which sort of year will it be remembered? We find this an intriguing question to contemplate for two reasons. The first is that 2022 was preceded by three years that can be seen as falling on distinctly different places on the spectrum.

A good argument can be made for 2019 as a mixed year. It was clearly a year of protest for one important part of the PRC, Hong Kong, with dramatic demonstrations and street clashes that rocked the city from June until the end of the year and beyond. Yet, there were few significant protests in any other part of the PRC, and Beijing conducted grandiose rituals to mark the seventieth anniversary of the country's founding.

An equally good argument can be made for treating 2020 as a year of protest, even though only one big march took place in Hong Kong that year, on New Year's Day. The government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the belated release of information to the punishment of whistleblowers, inspired significant expressions of discontent in Wuhan, where the outbreak was first identified, and beyond. Residents in locked-down Wuhan shouted their anger from their windows on several occasions, though most public agitation tended to take online forms. The protests did not swell into a nationwide mass movement. Yet, at times, there was so much anger being expressed online that some commentators, noting that many people trapped in their homes by lockdown were binge-watching the television series *Chernobyl*, wondered whether the CPC was facing a similar crisis of faith as that depicted in the Soviet Union.

In contrast, 2021 was a year of official ceremonies. There were some protests, including new ones triggered by lockdowns, but a grudging acceptance of the zero-COVID approach to the pandemic appeared to be taking hold. The idea that COVID-19 might have a Chernobyl-like delegitimising impact on the CPC faded, just as the advent of the internet and the expanding middle class had prompted mistaken predictions that a complete restructuring of the political system would soon take place. The protests of the year were overshadowed by the many ceremonies held to celebrate the CPC's centenary, highlighted by the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the CPC's founding and the revelation of the third historic resolution that cemented Xi Jinping's unchallengeable status in the party's history.

The First Three Quarters of 2022: Ceremonies and Protests

The second reason for asking 'what sort of year was 2022' relates to predictions. PRC politics takes surprising turns that can confound even the most expert analysts. At the start of 2022, China seemed to be headed into a second consecutive year of spectacles. In February, Beijing held a grand

ceremony to kick off the Winter Olympic Games, with China's paramount leader Xi putting forward a 'united front' with Russian president Vladimir Putin. The population seemed generally reconciled to lockdowns as official media continued to emphasise the failures of alternative approaches to the pandemic, citing the high death tolls in the United States and the United Kingdom.

There were some displays of discontent triggered by frustration with new lockdowns, including in cities like Xi'an,[2] where thirteen million residents were forced into a sudden lockdown, and communities such as Wuhan that were undergoing second or third periods of mass quarantine.[3] But these were isolated rumblings of discontent spread over January, February, and March. As for ceremonies, it was a near certainty that a big once-every-five-years party congress would occur during the second half of the year with plenty of pomp and circumstance.

In April, however, much outrage was expressed online over the Shanghai lockdown, which was an especially harsh one and seemed extraordinary in part because of the city's reputation as an unusually freewheeling place.[4] Befitting the urban centre's cosmopolitan history, expressions of discontent mixed locally specific and international elements. A version of a sketch about breakfast by popular American comedy duo Key & Peele circulated online, dubbed into Shanghainese, and changed into a critique of the difficulty of securing food during the lockdown.[5] Another online post that resonated with many described T.S. Eliot's famous line about April being the 'cruellest month' taking on new meaning in locked-down Shanghai. Various testimonies about the difficulties of life under lockdown emerged, including a collection of recordings from distressed citizens across the city that was turned into an audio montage called 'Voices of April',[6] which went viral briefly before being censored; several also aired on the podcast *Stochastic Volatility* 随机波动.

Then, in May, there was a small protest, with online and in-person elements, at Peking University (or Beida 北大) — an institution with a special place in the history of Chinese social movements going back to the 1919 May Fourth Movement, but one that has rarely seen protests of any kind since

1989. The 2022 protests at Beida began after students discovered workers erecting a wall of metal sheeting to separate their dormitories from faculty housing, with many outraged by the university's attempt to restrict their basic freedoms while faculty members' lives remained largely unaffected. On 15 May, after news of the wall spread across social media platforms, at least 200, and possibly as many as 300, students gathered to demand the university remove the barrier.[7] Videos show some students trying to tear down the wall as others cheer them on.[8]

The Associated Press reported on 17 May that a school official sent to wind down the protests told students: 'Please put down your mobile phone, protect Peking University.' One student shouted in response: 'Is that protection? How about our rights and interests?'[9] Even though the protest forced university authorities to abandon the plan to maintain the metal divider, similar protests erupted on other college campuses in Beijing. Most were prompted by the authorities' attempts to impose strict lockdowns affecting the students' daily lives.

By September and October, despite increasing social and media controls associated with the all-important party congress, it began to seem possible that 2022 could end up as a year of protests. Strict pandemic control measures like daily PCR tests were generating a great deal of anger. The Beijing banner protest in October, which mixed criticism of zero-COVID policies with broader condemnation of President Xi, resonated widely: 'We want food, not nucleic acid tests. We want freedom, not lockdowns. We want dignity, not lies. We want reform, not Cultural Revolution. We want elections, not rulers. We want to be citizens, not slaves.' The original banners, the person responsible for them, Peng Lifa 彭立发 (who posted online as Peng Zaizhou 彭载舟), and online posts including photographs and videos all quickly disappeared, but the action has had a notable afterlife. The daring action by the lone protester — soon nicknamed the Bridge Man or New Tank Man (a reference to the man who stood before a line of tanks in Beijing the day after 1989's 4 June massacre) — inspired others. The words on the banners have appeared on campuses outside China but also, more daringly, have been scrawled inside toilet stalls on the mainland as graffiti.[10]

Peng Lifa's words appeared inside toilet stalls across China
Source: Twitter

In stark contrast to the protests, the party congress illustrated the underlying goals of spectacle. Official speeches, amendments to the party's constitution, and resolutions all stressed the key themes of stability and security. They also emphasised that the CPC alone could provide and guarantee this stability and security to the people, claiming this as one of its great accomplishments. If there are problems, these are treated as mistakes that local officials have made in carrying out directives, not as fundamental flaws to an approach that is tirelessly defended. The CPC does not share the prevailing international narrative that the Shanghai lockdown was botched.[11] This point was made blazingly clear in October when Li Qiang, the party secretary of Shanghai, who was responsible for that city's lockdown, was elevated to the number-two spot on the Politburo Standing Committee, just below Xi.

November Surprises

Then came November, and the protests spread throughout the country, sparked by lockdown-induced desperation, a workers' revolt, sympathy for the victims of a fatal fire and other incidents in which the zero-COVID policy contributed to people's deaths, and, of all things, the sight of maskless crowds at the soccer World Cup in Qatar, cheering on their teams in packed bleachers.[12]

As COVID-19 case numbers rose once again in the southern city of Guangzhou, officials quickly imposed lockdowns in several districts with a high concentration of migrant workers just as reports seemed to suggest that Beijing was about to start relaxing some of that city's pandemic control measures. Many residents in those districts were migrant workers from other provinces. Unable to go out to work or access government support, stretched economically, and harassed by the constant demands of testing, the restrictions on movement, and even the supply of food, these residents began marching in protest on 5 November. Scuffles broke out between frustrated workers and government staff, and angry citizens knocked down barriers put in place to facilitate the lockdown.

About the same time, dramatic videos began circulating showing workers — driven to desperation by the lockdown and insufficient food, medical supplies, and pay — fleeing Foxconn's megafactory in Zhengzhou. In the third week of November, violent clashes erupted between the remaining workers and security forces.

Then, in late November, a fire took at least ten lives in a residential building in Xinjiang's capital, Ürümqi. Word spread in Ürümqi and around the country that the people had been unable to escape the fire because of lockdown-related barriers, which had also prevented firefighters from extinguishing the blaze quickly enough. Although officials denied this was the case, the news pushed angry citizens to protest on the streets. They gathered in front of a government building, chanting slogans that demanded authorities end the strict lockdown that had been imposed across Xinjiang

'Grass mud horses' (alpacas) at Wulumuqi Zhonglu (Ürümqi Road), Shanghai. 'Grass mud horse' 草泥馬 is a homophone for 'fk you!' 肏你妈[13]**
Source: Chinese internet

for more than 100 days. Authorities in Ürümqi suddenly announced that the city had achieved 'social zero-COVID' and promised it would begin a staged relaxation of pandemic control measures in the coming days.

Even so, sympathy for those killed in the fire led to more protests around the country, including on Shanghai's Ürümqi Road, on the campuses of Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University and the Communication University of China in Nanjing, as well as in major cities like Guangzhou, Wuhan, and Chengdu. As protests spread across the country, protesters began holding up pieces of blank paper to symbolise all they were forbidden to say, though some shouted for Xi Jinping and the CPC to step down — the latter a demand not even the students in 1989 had dared to voice. Many people recited the words of Peng Lifa's banner.

While the public protests reflected shared frustration with the zero-COVID strategy, there was no nationwide coordination. China's ever more sophisticated surveillance and censorship regime played an important role as authorities can disrupt the spread of information by artificial intelligence–driven searches for keywords and images. In most cases, core messages or important information were initially shared very quickly across social media, but once authorities began to censor relevant content or keywords, information related to the protests quickly disappeared from the internet. This hindered organisers' ability to grow the protests — although during the anti-lockdown protest in November 2022, many Chinese relied on Western social media platforms like Twitter for updates about protests happening across China, as that was where most protest-related videos and images were shared by overseas Chinese influencers. This nonetheless requires using a virtual private network (VPN), which has become increasingly difficult to obtain, and people were subject to phone searches by the police after protests in late November.[14]

In the meantime, government and other authorities (Foxconn, for example) responded to the protests by addressing the issues that were the immediate prompts, including lifting strict pandemic control measures while deploying surveillance tools, applying pressure on identifiable leaders and their families, and arresting several protesters to create a chilling effect. The protests tended to subside very quickly.

That marks the fundamental difference between the protests that took place in 2022 and the large-scale, student-led protests across China in 1989 demanding higher ideals like democracy and freedom. The protests throughout 2022 did show that Chinese citizens, despite facing greater risks and likely having to pay heavier prices for their actions, have not completely lost their will and instincts to protest oppression. However, the durability of these acts of dissent is certainly weaker than the student-led movement in 1989, which was more tightly connected by a collective goal and by more sophisticated and intentional planning.

At the time of writing (10 December 2022), protests continued to erupt sporadically but seem to have moved from a late November peak towards what might end as a winter lull. Even if the rest of the year is comparatively quiet, however, one conclusion to draw from recent events is that significant protests of widely varied kinds are still possible, even though President Xi has ramped up control and surveillance of society to unprecedented levels. But the clear awareness of the potential consequences of their actions and major obstacles to many forms of organising make it an open question exactly how citizens could create any sort of extended movement.

Many who participate in physical or online protests are doing it from personal instinct, rather than for a greater ideal, or the sake of the larger population. That said, although the unprecedented level of nationwide protests that have emerged since November has largely been triggered by Chinese people's discontent with lengthy periods of strict lockdowns and the threat they pose to people's livelihoods, what also stands out during the protests in different major cities is the collective grievance that Chinese citizens feel as they cite examples of deadly accidents caused by the extreme nature of the zero-COVID strategy, including the Guizhou bus accident, and the despair reflected through countless suicides amid strict lockdowns in different cities.[15] While Beijing tries to appease public anger and frustration by easing the zero-COVID strategy, the damage the policy has inflicted on society is one of the main driving forces of the remarkable scale of public protests.

All in all, 2022 was a year of surprises, sharply punctuated by the November protest surge, and the dramatic shifts in the party's COVID-19 policies in December. Although it is worth noting that in the narrative promoted by CPC spokespeople and periodicals, this change is viewed not as a rethinking of policy, but as somehow part of a single correct strategy that is gradually unfolding.

We can only imagine what 2023 will bring.

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