

## Outspokenly Unspoken: The Chinese People's 'White Paper Revolution'

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*A devastating fire in Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang autonomous region in the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 24 November 2022, caused the first large-scale nation-wide protests since the 1989 Democracy Movement. Demonstrators, many of whom were convinced that the deaths and injuries could have been entirely prevented had there not been a lockdown in Urumqi, took to the streets in almost all major Chinese cities. Before the end of the weekend of 26-27 November, the events were branded as the "White Paper Revolution" (bai zhi geming)<sup>1</sup> – a reference to the blank white sheet of paper that many protesters brought with them to state their dissatisfaction with the constrained possibilities to express their frustration over the strict zero-Covid measures.*

### A THREAT TO XI JINPING'S LEADERSHIP?

In 2016, the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) designated Xi Jinping as the "leadership core" (*lingdao hexin*)<sup>2</sup> of the Party, acknowledging his all-powerful reign after a four-year period during which he had overcome significant intra-Party opposition after being elected General Secretary of the CCP in 2012. During his challenging first years in power, Xi also launched a pro-active foreign policy in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (*Yi dai yi lu changyi*)<sup>3</sup>, originally a means to resolve overcapacity in the PRC's state industry – a problem that all generations of leadership since Mao Zedong's death in 1976 have had to cope with.

Xi is not the first leader to be referred to as "core" of the CCP: the designation was introduced by the *People's Daily*

during the height of the protests of 1989 to refer to Deng Xiaoping and – retroactively – Mao Zedong.<sup>4</sup> Later, Jiang Zemin (General Secretary of the CCP from 1989 to 2002) also received the title, while Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao (General Secretary of the CCP from 2002 to 2012), was "merely" referred to as the CCP leadership's "principal representative" (*zhuyao daibiao*)<sup>5</sup> – essentially *primus inter pares* – during his tenure at the helm of the PRC.

Unlike the calls for freedom of expression following the death of doctor Li Wenliang in early February 2020<sup>6</sup> that did not lead to major direct attacks on Xi's leadership position, the protests of November 2022 appear to be of a different nature. The calls for freedom of expression in the wake of doctor Li's demise quickly vanished, as lockdowns and restrictions of the freedom of movement and of assembly were put in place in most corners of the world.<sup>7</sup> In contrast with the public response to the death of Li Wenliang and, in general, with the period from 2016 until November 2022 during which the slogan "Resign Xi Jinping" only emerged locally and online (the most direct appeals in this regard took place during the protests in Hong Kong in 2019 and 2020, but at all times the Party was able to prevent any outfall beyond the defiant city), the November 2022 protests spread to almost all major Chinese cities, and involved a wide array of social groups.

Under normal circumstances – "normal circumstances" referring to the general state of affairs inside the CCP's higher echelons of power since the death of chairman Mao Zedong in 1976 – one might assume that the events of November 2022 could be highly damaging for Xi's reputation and should have significant intra-Party repercussions. After all, in 1976, the downfall of

the “Gang of Four” (*si ren bang*)<sup>8</sup> commenced through agitation against the Cultural Revolution on Beijing’s Tiananmen Square; in 1978, Deng Xiaoping used the “Xidan Democracy Wall” (*Xidan minzhu qiang*)<sup>9</sup> in Beijing to his advantage to seize power from Mao’s designated successor Hua Guofeng; in 1987, escalating student protests forced liberal CCP chairman Hu Yaobang to resign in face of the indignant conservative Party elders (*yuanlao*);<sup>10</sup> and in 1989, his (also liberal) successor Zhao Ziyang was put under house arrest after factional infighting over the best course of action in dealing with the pro-democracy protesters mourning Hu Yaobang on – again – Tiananmen Square. After the crackdown on 4 June 1989, even Deng Xiaoping himself suffered some reputational loss and had to struggle for three years to return to the center of power, which he finally achieved through his “Southern Tour” (*nanxun*)<sup>11</sup> of early 1992, when he successfully advocated to resume and reinforce his Reforms and Opening-up (*gaige kaifang*)<sup>12</sup> campaign that had commenced in late 1978.

According to this logic, the events of late November 2022 should indeed have their due repercussions for Xi’s position. However, with the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress putting in place a politburo that consists exclusively of Party members either directly or indirectly affiliated to Xi’s faction,<sup>13</sup> times have clearly changed (remember Hu Jintao’s pat on the shoulder of his closest ally Li Keqiang, the incumbent premier, on his way out of the closing ceremony of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, and the fact that expected powerbrokers like Li Keqiang and liberal reformer Wang Yang did not even figure among the 205 members of the 20<sup>th</sup> Central Committee).<sup>14</sup> The question thus arises whether sufficient “checks and balances” – the Party elders are long gone – are still in place within the CCP that could produce an outcome similar to the above historical precedents.

Might pressure *outside* the CCP then pose a challenge to Xi’s rule? As most calls for an end to Xi’s – or even, the CCP’s – rule remained quite localized over the last weekend of November 2022, with the protestors in Shanghai (Jiang Zemin’s powerbase) being most vocal, this remains highly unlikely in the short-term. All in all,

most protesters seemed primarily concerned with general zero-Covid restrictions and local bread-and-butter issues caused by their strict implementation. With the Spring Festival (22 January 2023, popularly known as “Chinese New Year”) coming up, many Chinese – especially those abroad – simply want to be able to visit their families.

### A NEW “1989”?

At first sight, one might discern some similarities between 1989 and the protests of late November 2022. Both movements received support from similar groups, namely, students calling for increased freedoms and workers looking for an end to their suffering due to economic downturns – in 1989 caused primarily by an overheating economy and staggering inflation. Another similarity is that, like in 1989, most protestors have attempted to preserve a base line of patriotism by singing the *Internationale*, waving the Five-star Red Flag, quoting the national anthem, and referring to several older communist texts. This was often done with a sense of irony and selectivity, however. For example, during recitations of the national anthem, the protestors’ emphasis was put on the first stanza “Arise, those who do not wish to be slaves” (*Qilai! Bu yuan zuo nuli de renmin!*).<sup>15</sup> In citing speeches by, among others, Mao Zedong and Xi’s more liberal father Xi Zhongxun (who, for example, in 1987 was Hu Yaobang’s sole defender in the politburo), they sought to accentuate the importance of freedom of expression by quoting “uncensorable” sources. Similar creativity was seen in 1989.

The Chinese concept of “*geming*”<sup>16</sup> as in “*bai zhi geming*” (White Paper Revolution) has traditionally more to do with “appealing to leadership to live up to its promises”, rather than “toppling the leadership”. This confirms the observation that the return to stability which the establishment of the PRC on 1 October 1949 brought about, after a period of more than one hundred years rife with rebellion, upheaval, war and civil war, has made many Chinese willing to give up part of their individual freedom for the sake of national freedom, guaranteed by the CCP. Remember that among the first signatories of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights on 10

December 1948, was Peng Chun Chang, representing the then Republic of China (ROC).<sup>17</sup> Ever since, the tension between national and individual freedom has run as a red thread through the CCP's policies that have over the years, by fluctuating degrees, constrained freedom of speech. A last – albeit post-factum – similarity between 1989 and 2022 is that the death of Hu Yaobang on 15 April 1989, incited the events of 1989; on 30 November 2022 Jiang Zemin, who came to power following the crackdown in June 1989, died, mere days after the weekend of the main White Paper protests.

Despite these parallels, a wider movement like in 1989 is unlikely to arise anytime soon. As stated above, the crackdown in 1989 was a product of a factional struggle within the CCP, between liberals and hardliners. After the ascendancy of the “all-Xi politburo” in October 2022, such struggles have become unlikely in the short-term. The death of Jiang Zemin is also not likely to stir up a mood of widespread mourning – although one spontaneous vigil in Shanghai was rapidly curbed by a heavy security presence. Since Jiang Zemin came to power as a compromise figure between the two struggling factions in 1989, he lacks the liberal identification Hu Yaobang enjoyed with the pro-democratic mourners that year. In this vein, the choice of the CCP to stress Jiang's anti-liberal credentials after his demise is logical. The official announcement (After the deaths of Mao Zedong in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping in 1997, this is the CCP's third ever “Letter to the whole Party, the army, and the people of all ethnic groups in the country”), issued on 30 November 2022, stated:

“At the turn of the spring and summer of 1989, serious political turmoil occurred in our country. Comrade Jiang Zemin supported and implemented the correct decision of the Party Central Committee to oppose turmoil with a clear-cut stance, defend the socialist state power, and safeguard the fundamental interests of the people. He closely relied on all Party members, cadres and masses in effectively maintaining the stability of Shanghai.”<sup>18</sup>

The situation within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) also cannot be compared to 1989. In 1989, soldiers had to be brought in from outside Beijing, after the

capital's sympathetic garrison refused to undertake action against the protesters. This scenario is not likely to be repeated under the current heavily reformed and professionalized military status quo. The international setting has also fundamentally changed. After the 1989 crackdown, Deng Xiaoping needed three years (until his “Southern Tour” mentioned above) to restore the CCP's policy focus on economic development – the Party's lifeline of governmental legitimacy. The PRC's economic interdependence with the Western world has only increased since then. With a Chinese population that is not only increasingly demanding of its leaders on the topic of economic welfare (the 1989 crackdown led to a Western boycott against China, and the arms embargo is still in place), but also desires a strong nation that is treated respectfully within the international system, resorting to violence would be highly counterproductive for the CCP and could lead to a “Resign Xi Jinping” with a whole different connotation – constraining the “national freedom” of the country. This is an unsurmountable risk for both the current CCP leadership and the Chinese population. Resorting to bloodshed would equally jeopardize any possibility for said leadership to prove itself as a responsible stakeholder in looking for a peaceful, political solution for the war in Ukraine. Indeed, the economic and diplomatic stakes are already too high for a Tiananmen II.

### WHAT NOW?

An official government line against the protests is absent outside of the usual scattered warnings against colliding with powers from abroad (*jingwai shili*).<sup>19</sup> In this regard too, the authorities seem to have taken a lesson from 1989, when the *People's Daily* poured oil on the fire in late April by issuing sharp condemnations of those mourning Hu Yaobang. As of early December 2022, many Chinese, despite the scale of the protests, are still unaware of what has occurred. In that regard, the Great Chinese Firewall is effective in limiting further unrest. However, to placate those that do know, picking several scapegoats at the grassroots level related to local excesses – such as the Urumqi fire – where zero-Covid has gone overboard, is not unlikely.



If Xi Jinping *is* still constrained by some “checks and balances” within the CCP (although at this moment invisible for outside observers), there might still be ways out on the administrative level. While the CCP’s leadership positions have already been decided during October 2022, the National People’s Congress has yet to convene in March 2023, when the top government posts will be confirmed. This leaves the possibility of bringing in slightly more liberal voices – be it on the economic or political level – if the next months turn out to be challenging for the incumbent CCP leadership.

Escaping the catch-22 of its own zero-Covid policies will not be easy for the CCP. However, the first signs of a vaccination drive are visible as of late 2022. That an important turn in zero-Covid policies is slowly being initiated, is also forced by the economic reality – as stated, the lifeline of the CCP since Mao Zedong’s death has been the PRC’s near-continuous rapid economic growth. Under zero-Covid, the economy has already taken considerable blows, investor trust as well as consumer trust have plummeted, and youth unemployment has skyrocketed to 19.9%.<sup>20</sup> Developments on the labor market (e.g. rising labor costs in China) had already made many foreign companies inclined to transfer parts of their supply chains to South and Southeast Asia – a trend that is expected to accelerate due to the PRC’s zero-Covid policies. Should the PRC indeed experience long-term economic stagnation – or even, decline – pressure from “outside” on the position of the Party will, inversely, only increase. This economic reality – more than any popular protest – will probably serve as a prominent argument to justify an adjustment to the current zero-Covid policies. An economic justification has the possibility to, in an “outspokenly unspoken” manner, also accord to the demands of the protestors. There is, therefore, much incentive for Brussels, in a framework of “principled pragmatism”, to keep the economic and political lines with Beijing open.

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## Endnotes

- 1 白纸革命. Also known in English as “A4 Revolution”.
- 2 领导核心.
- 3 一带一路倡议.
- 4 The “Four Greats” (*si ge weida* 四个伟大), which were formally introduced by the *People’s Daily* on 20 August 1966, possibly were the closest predecessor of the later concept of “leadership core” during Mao’s rule, and stated that the chairman was the “great mentor, great leader, great commander, and great helmsman” (“伟大的导师·伟大的领袖·伟大的统帅·伟大的舵手”) of the Chinese people. The term “leadership core” was also first mentioned by the *People’s Daily*. When the protests in Beijing reached their zenith, an editorial on 27 May 1989 called to: “Resolutely support the Party Central Committee with Comrade Deng Xiaoping at its core” (“坚决拥护以邓小平同志为核心的党中央”). Later, Deng Xiaoping would retroactively state that from the 1935 Zunyi conference that took place during the CCP’s Long March onwards, Mao Zedong had effectively been the first-generation “leadership core” of the Party.
- 5 主要代表.
- 6 Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist of the Wuhan hospital had, on 30 December 2019, alerted colleagues in an online chat group of an outbreak of SARS-like pneumonia, but was warned by the Wuhan police “to not make false claims on the internet”. He died of SARS-CoV-2 on 7 February 2020.
- 7 China was not the only country that imposed a zero-Covid policy; Western media too praised Chinese policies, and the opinion was frequently voiced that authoritarian regimes were more efficient in handling the pandemic than democratic regimes. For an analysis of this discussion: see Bart Dessein. “Coping with Covid and the Myth of a Collective China.” *Asian Studies* 10.1, pp. 97-119.
- 8 四人帮.
- 9 西单民主墙. The general pro-democracy movement of late 1978 is also known as the “Beijing Spring” (*Beijing zhi chun* 北京之春).
- 10 元老.
- 11 南巡.
- 12 改革开放.
- 13 Xi’s broader faction is generally known as the “Xi Clan” (*Xi jiajun* 习家军). The term “New Zhijiang Army” (*Zhijiang xinjun* 之江新军), meanwhile, is often used to specifically refer to Xi’s inner circle of associates who he met during his time as CCP secretary in Zhejiang province (2002–2007) – of whom several are present on the 20<sup>th</sup> politburo elected in October 2022.
- 14 See Bart Dessein, Jasper Roctus, and Sven Biscop, ‘Xi Jinping Seeks Stability. The 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP.’ *Egmont Policy Brief* 291, October 2022.
- 15 起来! 不愿做奴隶的人民!
- 16 革命.
- 17 See Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, *Chinas Angst vor der Freiheit. Der lange Weg in die Moderne* [China’s Fear of Freedom. The Long Road to Modernity]. München: Verlag Beck, 2009, p.11.
- 18 《告全党全军全国各族人民书》：“一九八九年春夏之交我国发生严重政治风波，江泽民同志拥护和执行党中央关于旗帜鲜明反对动乱，捍卫社会主义国家政权、维护人民根本利益的正确决策，紧紧依靠广大党员、干部、群众，有利维护上海稳定。” The undertone in this statement that Jiang Zemin, then Party secretary of Shanghai, was a hardliner during the events of 1989 is not in line with the observation that he mostly managed to solve the issues in Shanghai peacefully through talks with local protesters.
- 19 境外势力.
- 20 <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-youth-unemployment-nearly-20-/6715736.html> (last accessed on December 4, 2022).





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