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### The Peril of China's Zero-Covid Policy

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## The Peril of China's Zero-Covid Policy

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Jacob X. Marselli

Today in China, public trust erodes as inhumane living conditions consume the reality of citizens living within cities. Chinese citizens have been forced into confinement, either trapped inside homes, apartments, work environments, and even public restrooms. Citizens trapped inside places of residency or work environments find themselves unable to escape as doors are welded closed by the state. Beyond the concealed doors, the outdoors consist of a plethora of other barriers such as fences, walls, fear of Covid-19, police, and chemicals released into the air. At the heart of such inhumane life conditions lies Xi Jinping's fear of cross national movements of democratization becoming emulated within China. Xi openly expresses his fear by referencing the threatening circumstances which had taken place during the "colour revolutions," believing that a political revolution would undermine the CCP (The Economist, 2022). As Xi and the CCP struggled to maintain a firm grip on the spread of the new Omicron variant, a "Zero-Covid policy" remained in 2021 as the solution. Sticking with the Zero-Covid policy instead of mandating vaccines for citizens, China's economy dampened while roughly four hundred million Chinese citizens were forced into lockdowns (Huang, 2022). The episodes of public grievances are precisely what began to erode the public's faith in Xi Jinping. Additional issues to lockdowns restricting self-movement had surfaced. Access to basic necessities such as food grew concerning, Covid cases grew to a record high of 30,000 per day, and word spread that a building fire killing ten Uyghurs in Urumqi was the direct result of external barriers restricting firefighters entry into the building (Huang, 2022). As outcry and protests erupted following the Urumqi episode, China flooded posts depicting drones announcing mandatory lockdowns, chemicals

sprayed in the air, and inhumane living conditions. Bot accounts implemented by the Chinese government would post loads of content under specific hashtags as a method of cracking down on the spread of protest in the media (Milmo, 2022). Even in my own experience, social media presented occasional stints of citizens in Shanghai trapped in bathrooms or people screaming to one another outside the windows of twenty story buildings. However, upon searching #Shanghai or #WhitePaperProtest, social media pages would only display a vibrant city, art, or nature.

Despite China's highly restrictive Zero-Covid policy, a massive police presence and the strict crack down on media coverage protests prevailed. What underlying mechanisms paved the way for protests calling for a political revolution in China? This paper argues that given the above mentioned circumstances, (i) emulation, (ii) hidden transcripts, and (iii) creative vehicles for organization, paved the way for protest in spite of Xi Jinping's Zero-Covid policy.

The cremation of ten Uyghurs as a result of the Urumqi building fires initially fueled resentment for Xi Jinping's zero Covid policy (Huang, 2022). But how is it that such reactions in Urumqi spread nationwide causing protests to be seen in Shanghai? Local social movements and acts of civil disobedience had created a snowball effect. As small movements took place, collective action spread. Previous movements were enough evidence for conventional civil society to realize that protests were actionable (Beissinger 2007, Pg.259). In other words "emulation," the exact cause of Xi Jinping's fear of colour revolutions, had occurred. Collective action spread as a direct result of both Zero-Covid's tight grip on Chinese citizen's freedom and the Urumqi fires. While nearly all Chinese citizens-friends, family, or strangers-share resentment towards the CCP, witnessing the Urumqi building fires confronts individuals with the fact that state-sponsored tragedies can happen to anyone. The Zero-Covid policy had allowed the spread of collective action across many different groups within cities of China. Shared feelings of

resentment combined with the spread of collective action provided momentum for others to protest. While states can construct conditions for protest by a “state centered approach,” meaning states themselves may politicize grievances and repress oppositional platforms, this framework also makes the government a target for political demands (Goodwin 2001, Pg. 45). Although the right conditions for protest may exist, it is ultimately up to the citizens to then spread collective action and catalyze a movement.

While the influence of other local or regional instances of political movements or protest can provide momentum for the spread of collective action, momentum is also fueled by the “subordinate group” who are the participants of collective action. Specifically the group of revolutionaries thought’s out of ear of the regime or “hidden transcript”. Seemingly, citizens across China share common grievances and experiences surrounding the Zero-Covid policy. Even a common fear is shared due to the episode of the Urumqi building fires. The grievances seem universal to all citizens. Similar to the spread of collective action resulting from surrounding protests, citizens themselves living within an environment where others share charged feelings of grievances may spread “collective madness”. While citizens may not publicly express to the face of the regime initial grievances they feel, if collectively everyone was to feel the same charged feelings, one individual expressing his anger publicly will cause others to follow suit. This is precisely how hidden transcripts provide momentum for the spread of collective action. An atmosphere where many feel the same strong feelings within the hidden transcript can easily erupt and surface collective action. With the success of one act of defiance, others sharing similar thoughts will then gain confidence and follow suit (Scott 1990, Pg.222). A direct example of this is seen during the protests occurring in Shanghai on Urumqi road following building fires in Western China. As protestors marched down the road chanting

demands for freedom, one protestor named Wang eventually expressed publicly the hidden transcript of “Xi Jinping... down with him”, with the crowd surrounding him growing louder mimicking the now public chant (Rammello, 2022). However one may argue the growth of collective action may be dependent upon the weighing of personal benefits or individual preferences which often remain hidden. Individuals will fail to express their own preferences due to fear of repression in an instance of preference falsification (Kuran 1991, Pg. 20). Yet then the spread of collective action would be solely dependent upon individuals choosing to act when it feels “right”. The right moment would then depend on a plethora of factors such as crowd size, whether acting is worth it, or if they know others feel the same way. In the case of China’s Zero-Covid protests, hidden transcripts within such a charged environment following the Urumqi building fires best explain the spread of collective action by the people. While yes there may be individual costs weighed out, the common shared narrative for a democratic movement allowed Wang to chant the hidden transcript of “down with Xi Jinping” (Rammello, 2022). Wang had knew that those around him shared this common narrative due to the chants directly beforehand. The charged environment as described by Scott in the instance of publicly stated hidden transcripts is more representative than a thought-out cost-benefit analysis before acting.

There also remains the puzzle of despite heavy lock down restrictions and strong media censorship by methods of flooding, how had citizens been able to collectively organize despite lacking platforms for organization? Individuals had to get creative. In another instance of hidden transcript resulting in the spread of collective action, a university student in Beijing had stood outside upon steps holding a blank piece of A4 paper. Despite the paper being taken away from the students, quickly hundreds of students joined in holding up pieces of white paper. Due to the awareness of the barriers of censorship regarding recent internet crackdowns, individuals had

been innovative, holding up blank pieces of paper as a way to express themselves without having to say a word or write anything down. The A4 paper was a creative and resourceful way for citizens to protest harsh censorship conditions barring them from collectively organizing to protest (Pearlman 2021, Pg. 1790). Along with innovations to display a message despite barriers, in doing so organization had paved way for the structure of mobilization since more and more people began to join students holding up pieces of paper at the university. The ability to mobilize viewed first hand by individuals in conventional civil society were able to directly view the possibility of a mass protest despite barriers of censorship barring them from organizing in virtual civil society (Pearlman 2021, Pg. 1791). The ability for individual to be cognitively aware of their surroundings, paves the way for creative instances of organizing collective civil society which then provides momentum for mobilization.

On the basis of (i) emulation, (ii) hidden transcripts, and (iii) creative vehicles for organization, protests had been driven in spite of Xi Jinping's Zero-Covid Policy. Surrounding instances of minor protests provided emulated into more frequent and larger protests across China. Similar charged up feelings of universal grievances in the form of hidden transcript, allowed for a domino effect of resentment being burst into the public as many gained satisfaction from collective expression. Lastly, despite censorship of protests and internet crackdowns limiting the organization of virtual civil society, creative efforts by conventional civil society in China still occurred leading to collective action and mobilization of the masses.

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