# What Were the True Demands of the "Blank Paper" Protests?
# Not Revolutionary, Mostly Moderate

by
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Defense Date: March 21st, 2025

Approved:
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Asian/Pacific Studies Institute
in The Graduate School of
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ABSTRACT

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# Abstract

The Blank Paper Protests of 2022 were widely seen as a major act of resistance in China, but this thesis argues they were not a revolutionary movement. Instead, they reflected public frustration with the arbitrary enforcement of Zero-COVID policies rather than a fundamental challenge to state authority. Protesters sought practical policy adjustments rather than systemic political change. This thesis adopts a three-pronged approach: informal conversations with community officials in Wuhan and Shanghai reveal how pandemic enforcement was decentralized to the lowest levels; a self-compiled dataset of 226 protest incidents maps protest patterns and grievances; and 2021 to 2022 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) data contextualizes broader public sentiment. Findings show that while dissatisfaction with Zero-COVID measures was widespread, trust in the central government remained intact. The protests dissipated once policies changed, indicating a demand for governance reform rather than regime change. This thesis situates the movement within China's crisis management strategies, illustrating the limits of public compliance when state narratives diverge from lived experience.

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and I cherish the memories we've created together—our travels, birthdays, and late-night drinks. Perhaps our paths will cross again in the future, and I hope that when they do, we will have become even better versions of ourselves.

# 1. Introduction

The Blank Paper Protests, which erupted across China in late 2022, have been widely interpreted as the most significant public demonstrations since 1989. Characterized by their ambiguity—symbolized through the blank sheets of paper protesters held—the movement raised critical questions about its true demands, scope, and long-term implications. Were these protests a revolutionary political movement seeking systemic change, or were they primarily a response to the unpredictable enforcement of Zero-COVID policies? This thesis critically re-examines the Blank Paper Protests to assess whether they constituted a foundation for revolution or were instead a demand for policy adjustments rather than political transformation.

To address this question, the thesis employs a multidimensional approach, integrating qualitative interpretations, case-based investigation, and quantitative public opinion analysis. Each methodological component provides a different lens through which to analyze the relationship between public dissatisfaction and protest participation.

In Section 2, the thesis details the methodological approach of this thesis, which integrates three distinct yet complementary sources of data: informal conversations, a self-compiled dataset of protest incidents, and large-scale survey data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). The informal conversations provide a qualitative lens to understand the lived experiences of both protesters and local enforcers, offering insight into their motivations, constraints, and perceptions. The self-compiled dataset, derived from publicly available protest documentation, enables a structured analysis of protest characteristics such as intensity, location, and demand types. Meanwhile, the CGSS data serves as a critical comparative tool, capturing broader public sentiment toward pandemic policies, economic hardship, and trust in governance. By combining these three methodological approaches, this thesis constructs a multi-layered analysis that moves beyond surface-level narratives, situating the Blank Paper Protests within the broader sociopolitical landscape of contemporary China.

In Section 3, Background, the thesis establishes the broader context of the protests, examining the evolution of state repression under the Zero-COVID policy and the legal frameworks used to suppress dissent. This section explores how protest participants strategically navigated repression, particularly through the use of blank paper as an ambiguous yet potent symbol. It also introduces the "Big White" pandemic enforcers—frontline workers whose presence embodied both the authority and contradictions of state pandemic control.

In Section 4, Interpreting “Blank” Paper, the thesis presents a qualitative interpretation of the protests through informal conversations with individuals directly involved in pandemic enforcement, particularly community officials in Wuhan and Shanghai. These insights reveal how pandemic policies were decentralized to the lowest levels of governance, transforming local administrators into enforcers of policies over which they had little control. This perspective highlights the complex interplay between state directives and grassroots execution, shedding light on the grievances that fueled public frustration.

In Section 5, Investigation into Protest Activity, the thesis turns to a case-based investigation, using a self-compiled dataset of 226 protest incidents sourced from publicly documented records, particularly those archived by the X (formerly Twitter) account "李老师不是你老师" (Li Laoshi). This dataset allows for an in-depth examination of the spatial and temporal dynamics of the protests, identifying patterns in intensity, geographic distribution, and the specific grievances articulated by demonstrators. Through statistical mapping and heatmaps, this section traces how the movement escalated and subsequently dissipated.

In Section 6, Analyzing the Impact of COVID-19 Policy, the thesis conducts a quantitative analysis of public opinion trends using the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) data from 2021 and 2022. This section investigates whether the grievances expressed in the protests reflected broader societal sentiment or were confined to a politically active minority. It examines key indicators such as dissatisfaction with Zero-COVID policies, economic hardship, trust in central

and local government, and shifting attitudes toward pandemic control. The findings suggest that while frustration with lockdown measures was widespread, the protests themselves were driven by specific governance failures rather than a broader revolutionary push.

Taken together, these different methodological approaches allow this thesis to offer a nuanced understanding of the Blank Paper Protests. Rather than viewing the movement as a singularly revolutionary event, this study situates it within the broader landscape of pandemic-era governance, state repression, and shifting public sentiment in contemporary China. By analyzing both protester motivations and the sentiments of the broader public, this thesis evaluates whether the Blank Paper Protests laid the groundwork for deeper political change or remained a momentary response to crisis-driven frustrations.

I conclude that the Blank Paper Protests were not a revolutionary movement aimed at overthrowing the government but rather a reaction to governance failures and the excessive enforcement of Zero-COVID policies. While the protests reflected widespread public frustration, they did not signal a fundamental rejection of state authority. Instead, they represented a demand for policy adjustments rather than systemic change. The movement's rapid dissipation following the government's relaxation of restrictions underscores this point. By analyzing the protests through multiple methodological approaches—qualitative interpretation of informal conversations, a case-based investigation of protest incidents, and quantitative analysis of national survey data—this thesis demonstrates that the protests were driven by localized grievances and inconsistencies in policy implementation rather than a unified revolutionary intent.

## 2. Sources, Data, and Methods of Inquiry

In examining the meaning and role of "Big White" during the Zero-COVID period, this thesis follows three interpretive paths. My understanding of grassroots policy implementation was greatly enriched by informal conversations with individuals directly involved in pandemic enforcement. Discussions with community officials in Wuhan and Shanghai provided critical insights into how the implementation of Zero-COVID policies was decentralized to the lowest levels of governance. These accounts illustrate how local administrators—who were neither policymakers nor fully autonomous actors—became the frontline enforcers of pandemic control measures.

Before the pandemic, their responsibilities centered on community welfare, policy communication, and basic administrative tasks. However, under Zero-COVID, their roles shifted dramatically, requiring them to oversee lockdown enforcement, coordinate mass testing, and mediate between state directives and local realities. The decentralized structure of enforcement meant that orders from above were often ambiguous, leaving community officials to implement strict policies with little discretion.

Our conversations investigate how the "Big White" (大白) pandemic workers, often seen as faceless enforcers, were in reality a complex and strained part of the bureaucratic machinery, caught between rigid directives and public frustration. They symbolized both state authority and pandemic enforcement that were, in many cases, regular government employees temporarily reassigned to community-level work. These individuals, including party cadres, civil servants, and volunteers, were mobilized to ensure compliance, often facing logistical challenges and public frustration. Their role underscores how Zero-COVID was enforced through a mix of bureaucratic discipline and ad hoc crisis management, making local-level officials the face of state policy.

This shift provides crucial context for understanding the role of "Big Whites" as both enforcers and intermediaries, tasked with implementing strict measures while lacking the discretionary power to modify them. It also explains the contradictions in public sentiment: while many residents were

dissatisfied with rigid enforcement, the burden placed on local administrators also made them victims of the system they were enforcing.

This structural reality explains the contradictions in public sentiment toward enforcement. On the one hand, residents expressed deep frustration with the rigidity of Zero-COVID measures; on the other, the burden of enforcement fell disproportionately on local administrators who themselves had little control over policy adjustments. This dynamic reveals how Zero-COVID was not merely a centralized directive but a complex, decentralized enforcement system in which frontline workers became both the face of the policy and, at times, its unintended victims. Understanding this process provides a necessary foundation for interpreting the role of "Big Whites" within the broader machinery of pandemic governance.

Beyond institutional enforcement, this thesis investigates how protesters developed adaptive strategies to navigate repression. A key element in this analysis is the symbolism of "white", which became central to both state control (e.g., white protective suits) and protest resistance (e.g., blank paper). Through an interpretive lens, this thesis examines how protesters blurred their messages, using blank paper and ambiguous slogans to evade legal repercussions.

A comparative analysis of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (寻衅滋事) as a legal charge provides further insight into the risks protesters faced. The study traces how this charge—historically used to suppress dissent—was repurposed during Zero-COVID to justify arrests, particularly in cases where protesters' demands remained deliberately vague. The contrast between directly stated political demands and quasi-blank resistance reveals a strategic dimension of protest behavior: minimizing risk while maximizing the spread of dissent.

The qualitative analysis is enriched by the examination of public discourse surrounding the protests. Social media narratives, public statements, and censorship patterns provide insight into how the movement was framed by both protesters and the state. While the Chinese government sought to downplay the protests as isolated acts of frustration, the deliberate ambiguity of protest

symbols allowed participants to express both policy dissatisfaction and broader systemic grievances without clear attribution.

This thesis constructs a comprehensive dataset of 226 protest incidents, drawing from crowdsourced documentation via the "Li Laoshi" X (formerly Twitter) account. This dataset categorizes protests by time, location, intensity, and demand type, offering a structured view of how the movement unfolded. The use of heatmaps and statistical distributions enables a systematic examination of protest escalation, intensity shifts, and spatial patterns, identifying key epicenters and their correlation with governance dissatisfaction.

To systematically analyze the relationship between public sentiment and protest participation, this thesis integrates large-scale public opinion data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) alongside a self-compiled dataset of protest incidents. The CGSS provides a representative national perspective on attitudes toward pandemic policies, political trust, and economic conditions, allowing for direct comparisons between protesters and the broader population. By examining regional dissatisfaction, economic hardship, and shifting trust in governance, the analysis assesses whether the grievances expressed in the Blank Paper Protest were reflective of wider social discontent or specific to a politically active minority.

By triangulating case-based insights, qualitative interpretations, and quantitative analysis, this thesis develops a multi-dimensional perspective on the Blank Paper Protest. Rather than treating the movement as a singularly revolutionary event, this study situates it within the broader landscape of pandemic-era governance, adaptive state repression, and evolving public sentiment in contemporary China. Through this approach, the analysis bridges the perspectives of protesters as a politically engaged minority and the general public's broader but less overt discontent, offering a more nuanced understanding of the forces that shaped this moment of contention.

# 3. Background

## *3.1. Isolated Incidents*

In the early morning of September 18, 2022, the Sandu County Public Security Bureau in Guizhou Province issued a notice that a bus rollover accident had occurred at the K31 section of the Sandu County section of the Sanli Expressway in Qiannan Prefecture. The bus was carrying 47 people. The accident caused 27 deaths and 20 injuries. According to the Guiyang Daily, the bus was a quarantine transfer vehicle for people involved in the epidemic in Guiyang City. The incident quickly sparked heated discussions on the Chinese internet. The authorities quickly began to censor and delete content related to the topic.[1] The accident caught the attention of citizens around the nation, and served as an outlet for netizens to vent their criticisms of the unreasonable Zero-Covid policy, such as the risks of transferring individuals overnight and the lack of respect for human rights. What makes the Guizhou bus rollover accident different from previous accident caused by Zero-Covid policy is that, in the Guizhou bus accident blame could be completely attributed to the inhumane Zero-Covid policy and the local government had to take the responsibility for the accident. The previous accidents, cases are "individualized" or could be blamed on ground-level workers. For examples, at the end of April 2022, in Pudong, Shanghai, an elderly man had been suffering from kidney stones at home since the lockdown began at the end of March. After half a month, the neighborhood committee finally allowed him to leave the residential area for medical treatment following repeated requests from his family. However, while his family was driving to the hospital, they discovered roads in Pudong New District were closed and officials did not allow passage. In the early hours of April 25, unable to bear the pain any longer, the elderly man hanged himself from a tree in the residential area's garden.[2]

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[1] Yong Xiong,Nectar Gan,Philip Wang. (2022, September 20). *27 people killed in China's Covid quarantine bus crash*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/18/asia/china-guizhou-quarantine-bus-intl/index.html

[2] Elijah. (2022, June 22). *【404 档案馆】第 125 期：“不要宽恕昨夜的罪”——念出上海疫情逝者的名字（续）*. 中国数字时代. https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/683286.html

In this latter case, although the voice of blame could be observed in the comments section, the government blamed officials of the ground as “the implementation of the policy is rigid.” The formula is widely used in the response to similar accidents. When this formula could no longer be acceptable in the case of the Guizhou bus accident, the local government, even the central government had to directly face the anger and doubt from citizens. The tolerance of the public was dramatically challenged. This lay the groundwork for a massive protest triggered by a second accident.

On October 13, on the eve of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, on an overpass of Sitong Bridge on Beijing’s North Third Ring West Road, Peng Lifa, held a banners of calling for an end to China's harsh Zero-Covid policy and the overthrow of Xi Jinping.[3] The slogans on the banners became widespread during the subsequent Blank Paper protests: “We don't want nucleic acid testing, we want food to eat;” “We don't want lockdowns, we want freedom; We don't want lies, we want dignity;” “We don't want Cultural Protest, we want reform;” “We don't want [dictatorial] leaders, we want elections;” “We don't want to be slaves, we want to be citizens.” And, on another short banner explicit anti-Xi content: "Strike from classes, strike from work, remove the dictatorial traitor to the country Xi Jinping." The police arrested Peng Lifa, the incident quickly attracted public attention on the Chinese internet, but authorities censored videos, images, and text related to it. Various platforms also posted sensitive terms such as "Sitong Bridge", "bridge", "brave person", and "warrior”. Many netizens were permanently banned for the internet sharing related information. The protest on the Sitong bridge in Beijing was the first protest during Zero-Covid policy period that called for political freedom and directly targeted Xi.

Although the Sitong bridge banner and slogans widely spread on the internet, no particular collective incident ensued from this protest, due to censorship the highly sensitive slogans and heavy repression. Collective action did follow a tragic accident in Xinjiang, however also caused

[3] China protest: Mystery Beijing demonstrator sparks online hunt and tributes. (2022, October 14). BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63252559

by inhumane Zero-Covid policy. The accident nationwide protests.

## *3.2. Collective Action*

On the evening of November 24, 2022, a high-rise residential building in the Jixiangyuan community of the Tianshan District in Urumqi, Xinjiang, which had been under lockdown for nearly four months, caught fire. The blaze lasted for almost three hours. According to a situation report released by CCTV, the official Chinese media, the fire was apparently caused by an electrical power strip, if resulted in 10 deaths and 9 injuries. Some videos on the internet showed that the fire trucks were trapped by epidemic prevention barriers and could not enter the communities. They could only hose water from a distance, they were unable to reach the fire physically. Videos shot by community residents showed that the doors to the building's corridors were locked, preventing residents from escaping.[4] The accident triggered the anger of Chinese citizens, who express anger and sadness on the internet. Concern that strict Zero-Covid policy would cause more accidents like those in Guizhou and Xinjiang, some citizens started to call for ending lockdowns of residential complexes and for a more humane policy.

Two days after the deadly fire in Urumqi sparked a national mourning, which gradually escalated into protests.[5] Citizens in Shanghai gathered at Urumqi Middle Road to mourn victims of fire; then, in Beijing and around the country, people started to protest to lift the lockdowns of residential complexes. Students wrote the slogans of Sitong Bridge and Quotes from Lu Xun, Jia Zhangke, and other famous people on A4 paper and posted them to walls and statues on the campus. At around 4 in the afternoon on November 26, a student in Communications University of China, Nanjing held a piece of blank paper in the campus, videos of the students who joined him and argued with school leaders were then widely circulated on the Internet, prompting students from

[4] Nytimes.com. (2022, November 25). The New York Times - Breaking News, US News, World News and Videos. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/25/world/asia/china-fire.html

[5] He, L. (2022, November 29). 'White paper' protests: China's top stationery supplier says it's still selling A4 sheets | CNN business. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/29/economy/china-white-paper-protests-stock-run-intl-hnk/index.html

various colleges and universities to hold up blank paper in solidarity. Along with the images and videos widespread on the internet, protests broke out around the country. Blank paper became a symbol of protests, people took to the streets, holding up blank paper to mourn the deceased and express their dissatisfaction with the Zero-Covid policy. Subsequently, many protesters were arrested. The protests, known as the "Blank Paper protests", became the largest mass protest in China since the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement.

The Blank Paper protests are the direct outcome of a series of shocking accident caused by inhumane Zero-Covid policy. To some extent, they were also inspired by a protest in Beijing on the eve of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. These incidents happened in September to November 2022, reflecting a backlash toward failure of policy.

### *3.3. Legal Conflict: Repression for "Picking Quarrels and Provoking Trouble"*

The term "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (寻性滋事) refers to the act of intentionally provoking or angering others through words, actions, or other means in public places or in others' living or working environments, causing conflicts or disrupting social order. This criminal charge, under Article 293 of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China, traces its origins to the infamous "hooliganism" offense of the Maoist era. Today, it is widely and arbitrarily used in China to suppress speech and behavior that authorities deem a threat to political and social order. One of the most typical case is the Zhao Lianhai Case, before 2008 when melamine-contaminated milk powder on the market caused many young children in mainland China to suffer from kidney stones. One of the affected families, Zhao Lianhai, organized the 'Home for Kidney Stone Babies' to engage in rights protection work. In 2010, he was sentenced to two and a half years in prison on charges of provoking trouble.[6] At the beginning of the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, this change was abused to protect official control over information and to suppress dissent or disobedience to

[6] Nytimes.com. (2010, November 11). The New York Times - Breaking News, US News, World News and Videos. https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/11/world/asia/11beijing.html

policies. In February 2020, a former lawyer Zhang Zhan traveled to Wuhan as a citizen journalist to investigate the situation there firsthand and questioned the authorities' handling of the pandemic in videos uploaded online. She was detained in May 2020 and sentenced to four years in prison in December on charges of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."[7] The charge of picking quarrels has been abused during the Zero-Covid policy period, especially for cases related to "pandemic prevention" and even control of online speech.

[7] Free Zhang Zhan. (2021, November 11). Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/petition/china-zhang-zhan/

# 4. Interpreting “Blank” Paper

## *4.1. Nothing verses nothingness: Blank paper verses Pocket Crimes*

Each piece of paper signifies a protest, the use of Blank Paper to protests is revolutionary. In studying the protests, I categorize the use of blank paper into two: blank paper, and quasi-blank paper. I define quasi-blank paper as: unclear expression, but novel resistant expression of dissatisfaction. By contrast, blank paper is clear non-expression, resistant expression of dissatisfaction. Even though quasi-blank paper is not blank paper, it is parallel to the purpose of deliberately blurring their demands. I found various forms of quasi-blank paper. The most common is A4 sheets of paper write with sentences whose meanings are very ambiguous. For examples, in Shanghai, a paper on the wall in the street reads: “We can do more, you know what I'm talking about.” Interestingly, at Shanghai Normal University, a piece of paper posted on a bulletin board simply reads, “This is blank paper.” Another paper in Shandong reads: “Don’t add bricks to the building,” which is quite abstract in meaning, but could be understood under the context of strict Zero-Covid policy. A notable slogan widely written on quasi-blank paper uses the words on the banner of Sitong Bridge, but the space between “we don’t want” and “we want” is blank. For example, “we don't want nucleic acid testing, we want food to eat” becomes “we don’t want--we want.”

Some quasi-blank paper is in the form of installation art. For example, at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, students tied many masks to a tree made of cardboard, naming it “The Answer Blowing in the Wind.”

**Figure 1: The Answer Blowing in The Wind**

Some unclear resistant expressions of dissatisfaction are not categorized as quasi-blank paper, because the actions are actually commonly overserved methods of protests in China. This includes singing songs or quoting famous sayings, the Constitution, or regulations. At Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, students sang “Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies” and “Glorious Years,” two classic songs by the famous Hongkong band Beyond, in chorus to express their protest. Despite the visibility, vocality, and occasional violence of these protests, participants often make significant efforts to express their allegiance to central policies and leaders. While many journalists and some scholars have enthusiastically embraced the recent years' protests, contentious politics in post-Mao China remains highly limited in its targets and declared objectives. In this regard, contemporary protests maintain certain fundamental characteristics of both Mao-era and pre-Mao-era protests. One of these characteristics is a strong inclination among protesters to present their claims within the "legitimate" limits sanctioned by the central state. Undoubtedly, these limits have undergone substantial changes over time, driven by both state initiative and societal innovation (Perry, 2010). Moreover, they usually emphasize their loyalty to the regime and routinely cite central regulations or national leaders’ speeches to justify their demands (Huang, Boranbay and Huang, 2016). During the Blank Paper protests in Shanghai, a citizen was observed reading the Constitution in the street. In many instances, protesters sang the "Internationale" and the National Anthem together. The most

commonly observed elements in the Blank Paper protests were papers and banners featuring famous sayings by Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu, and Mao, taken from their poems and articles published in the influential magazine La Jeunesse. All the behaviors are categorized into common protest methods in China, which I distinguish from quasi-blank paper.

Analyzing the quasi-blank paper cases, compared to those common methods inherited from the past, creates an entry point to consider why people blur their slogans and ultimately prefer to hold a blank piece of paper in their hands. I regard blank paper as a strategy of self-protection, from charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.”

Debunking (辟谣) is always an effective and convenient method to sentence the crime as picking quarrels and provoking trouble, especially when the term “some of” is added as premise. The notion of "pocket crime" refers to the practice of having broad or vaguely defined legal provisions that can be selectively applied or interpreted to justify an arrest. This approach allows authorities a certain flexibility or "space" in determining what constitutes a crime, particularly in cases where the justification for arrest might not be immediately clear or widely accepted. Debunking is a perfect entry point to understand the practice of picking quarrels and provoking trouble. Flexibility in debunking is to rely on terms such as “some is false,” “some is rumor.” This however, leaves the underlying counterpart: “the rest is true.” When a lot of inhumane Zero-Covid measures and consequences were posted on the internet, official media accounts perfunctorily use this method to debunk rumors, even though many have been confirmed by numerous videos and pictures to be true.

Picking quarrels and provoking trouble shares the same logic, this crime is just like a pocket, everything could be put into it, which eliminates the need for a “reason” to arrest someone. As a counteraction, the blank paper eliminates the possibility of being prosecuted for one's speech, I regard this strategy as nothing verses nothingness, because on a piece of blank paper, anything can be written. To some extent, Article 293 of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China could

also be regarded as a piece of blank paper: anything could constitute a crime; the right of interpreting the law has been delegated to ground-level police, to local courts, to anyone anywhere other than Supreme People's Court, Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (the institutions with the ultimate authority to interpret legal provisions). In other words, anyone and any institution could have the ultimate authority to interpret legal provisions, if they have the right to prosecute picking quarrels and provoking trouble.

## *4.2 "White" as a method: Blank Paper verses White Protective Suit*

White was a symbolic element during the whole Zero-Covid policy period. In the critiques of netizens, the white protective suit is ironic, becoming Chinese traditional mourning clothes, which is a metaphor for its difficulty to be taken off, after having been worn for three years. The medical workers wearing white protective suits at the beginning of the pandemic were called "Big White" (大白), because their appearance closely resembles Baymax from Big Hero 6. In the early official pandemic response imagery, "Big White," often dressed in white isolation and semi-permeable protective suits, wearing N95 masks, goggles or face shields, double-layer rubber gloves, and both long and short shoe covers. Sometimes, they also wore work badges over their protective suits, along with drawn patterns, anti-pandemic slogans, markings of their affiliation, profession, or names. The act of medical staff rushing to assist Wuhan was greatly admired and appreciated by netizens in China.

As the Covid-19 gradually spread in China, due to the increased demand for personnel and the complexity of pandemic prevention work, the roles of "Big White" have become diverse, encompassing professional medical staff, community workers, firefighters, police officers, and more. Additionally, volunteers from various sectors also became "Big White" to assist in pandemic prevention efforts. However, with the introduction of Zero-Covid policy, dramatically increased demands for assisting, to some extent, 'Big White' became a profession. They worked in makeshift hospitals, communities, streets, institutions, and other places, engaging in patient care, nucleic acid

testing, material distribution, disinfection, and inspections of vehicles and personnel. In residential areas, they implemented the policy of locking down residential areas and apartment buildings and assisting government departments in transporting individuals who have tested positive for the Covid. Many individuals were temporarily recruited to become “Big White.” Susan Shirk, observes this as an evolution from relying on party member volunteers to depending on employees, who are not necessarily those with medical training.[8]For examples, the "2022 Wuhu Bay Zhiqu Epidemic Prevention and Control Volunteer Recruitment Announcement" asked their “Big White” to perform the following duties:

1. Epidemic investigation. Assist villages (communities) in conducting epidemic investigations, including registration of close contacts, flow investigation of key individuals, and other investigation tasks.

2. Checkpoint assistance. Help villages (communities) implement personnel control measures, cooperate in registering individuals' information, observe home quarantine and other prevention and control tasks, and check the entry and exit of individuals, etc.

3. Propaganda and guidance. Publicize the latest epidemic prevention policies of the party committee and government, popularize scientific knowledge of epidemic prevention and control, advocate a civilized and healthy lifestyle, and guide citizens to enhance their awareness of protection, etc.

4. Nucleic acid testing. Assist medical staff in information entry, order maintenance, guiding reminders, and disinfection work, etc., according to the needs of nucleic acid testing locations.

5. Logistics support. Assist villages (communities) in transporting epidemic prevention materials, distribute supplies to special groups and individuals in home quarantine, provide convenient services, etc.

6. Arrange other epidemic prevention and control related volunteer services as needed.

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[8] ‘No one remembers us’: China’s ‘big white’ pandemic workers Reel from end of Zero-Covid. (2023, February 3). Financial Times. https://www.ft.com/content/2cc7e36c-ec30-4c8a-8629-369663f82ac8

Individuals who meet the recruitment conditions, especially party members, veterans, moral models, good people around, civilized families, and social charitable organizations are encouraged to actively participate in the voluntary service for epidemic prevention and control, to promote the main social theme. We warmly welcome all people with a charitable heart to actively participate in social welfare activities, to jointly build and protect our civilized, harmonious, and beautiful homeland.[9]

As the composition of personnel became more complex, many unemployed individuals also joined the ranks of "Big White," treating it as a job without restraint. This led to a significant decline in the overall quality of the "Big White" group. When the videos on the internet widespread, which record ‘Big White’ forcefully entering homes to take people away for quarantine, and embezzling supplies to sell at high prices, “Big White” began to symbolize the enforcers of violent pandemic prevention measures. Some "Big White" were found to be abusing citizens. Disheartened netizens likened "Big White" to the fervent Red Guards who were part of the Cultural Revolution led by Mao Zedong. Videos of “Big White” beating locals who violated restriction rules circulated on social media. In one incident, a "Big White" killed a dog, while the dog's owner was sent to a centralized quarantine facility. People began to refer to "Big White" as "White Guards."

In a famous psychological Stanford “Prison” experiment, Zimbardo, concluded that “anonymous uniforms" can endow individuals with a subconscious desire for power control, while the anonymity of their identity provides a safe environment for exercising such power.[10] In special circumstances, anonymity brings a form of reinforcement, especially when endowed with certain powers and protected by an exterior shell, often leading to the risk of various terrorizing and venting behaviors. This reinforcement is accompanied by a dilution of responsibility. Moreover, in such conditions, power is legitimately granted, and the identity of the aggressor is completely erased by

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[9] 白卫兵 - China digital space. (n.d.). China Digital Times (CDT) – Covering China from Cyberspace. https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/%E7%99%BD%E5%8D%AB%E5%85%B5

[10] Zimbardo, P. (2003). A situationist perspective on the psychology of evil: Understanding how good people are transformed into perpetrators. Retrieved from https://www.zimbardo.com/downloads/2003%20Evil%20Chapter.pdf

the white shell, granting violence a natural protection from being exposed or held accountable. If “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” is the protective umbrella in policing, then Zero-Covid policy is the “one-size-suits-all” method for “Big White.” The White protective suit they wear serves as protective umbrella to justify every inhumane management they may conduct. And so called Zero-Covid policy to some extent could be regarded as a blank paper as well, which could write anything, any action “Big White” interpret as violate the policy on it. Rather than relying on specific legal provisions, violating the Zero-Covid policy can serve as a justification and motive for the enforcement forces to infringe on human rights. In the videos circulating online, those "Big Whites" in white protective suits, can be seen violently assaulting citizens and cruelly killing dogs with impunity. They are not held accountable for these actions, which are deemed "necessary" and "must be tolerated" for the sake of pandemic prevention. Under the anonymity that absolves responsibility, violence not only receives authorization but also protection; even the identity of the aggressor is mystically safeguarded. This responsibility serves only pre-determined goals, yet it negates social responsibility and even disregards the rights and interests of others.

## *4.3 The Ambiguity of White*

Understanding how the white protective suit became the symbolical protective umbrella of ground-level workers, and how its anonymity provides the condition for radical violence, we can understand why people blurred their purposes of protests until holding a piece of blank paper. A protester in Beijing wore a white protective suit and mask, holding a piece of A4 paper which reads: “Down with Xi Jinping.” A man in black wears a mask holding a blank piece of paper next to him.


**Figure 2: Blank Paper Protest**

This image vividly embodies the struggle between repression and resistance. Wearing white protective suit is a strategy to achieve anonymity during protest, as is a blank piece of paper. When power delegated to the ground-level is out of control, how to express the demands relatively safely becomes crucial. When the legitimacy of repression, not only during the protest, but more commonly conducted during the whole Zero-Covid period, lacks a clear explanation, minimize the information expressed is a feasible means of resistance. White becomes a symbol, but also a method, repression and resistance becomes a suspicion chain; the more ambiguous the expression, the less defined and specific it is, the more advantageous it becomes.

James C. Scott also described the protest method that share this feature in his book, Weapons of the Weak, which is a form of everyday resistance. To be more specific, it refers to the subtle, everyday forms of resistance employed by marginalized or subordinate groups to challenge the dominant power structures without openly confronting them. The weapons of the weak are characterized by their low profile, anonymity, and ambiguity, making it difficult for the authorities to identify and suppress them. These tactics are often used when open, organized resistance is too risky or impossible due to the asymmetry of power between the dominant and subordinate groups (Scott, 1985). Among the strategies that peasants in the small Malaysian village used, is one strategy corresponds to the function of quasi-blank paper and blank paper: mocking behind the back, alleged mockery and satire, by using humor, irony, or sarcasm to criticize or undermine the

authority of the dominant group without openly challenging them.

It is worth noting that the most important nuanced difference between protesters and repressor is: protesters cede to the oppressors the right to interpret their purposes, oppressors seek to hold the right to interpret the crimes and policy to themselves. Although the power of interpretation is ceded, the potential amount of information that can be conveyed by a piece of blank paper is infinitely magnified. Which means, the pressure and challenge for repressors to deal with uncertain purposes of protests is dramatically increased: Do they protest against the Zero-Covid policy? Or the third term of Xi Jinping? However, blank paper would not protected protesters? On the contrary, with delegated power, ground-level repressors easily interpreted the purpose of the protests and charged any pocket crime to protester: picking quarrels and provoking trouble, hindering pandemic prevention or spreading rumor, once they detect target.

The actual situation shows a failure of self-protection. Independent journalist Li Siqi, a freelance media personality and internet activist, participated in a Blank Paper protests with several friends, including Cao Zhixin and Li Yuanjing, at Liangmahe in Beijing's Chaoyang District on November 27, 2022. She was then informed on January 20, 2023, that she, along with her friends Cao Zhixin and Li Yuanjing, who were also part of the Blank Paper protesters, were formally arrested by the Chaoyang District Procuratorate in Beijing on suspicion of " picking quarrels and provoking trouble."[11]

What exactly is the revolutionary contribution of blank paper? Other than self-protection, the most important function of blank paper is maximize the expression of potential information and purposes in the protests. The cost is ceding the right of interpretation to the repressors, which could be regarded as a tradeoff, unconsciously. The reason why people choose to hold blank paper during protests seems now clear: for self-protection and to maximize expression of potential information and purposes, although the former ineffective proved.

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[11] 白纸革命 - China digital space. (n.d.). China Digital Times (CDT) – Covering China from Cyberspace. https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/%E7%99%BD%E7%BA%B8%E9%9D%A9%E5%91%BD

In Part C, I analyze the characteristics of the Blank Paper protests based on the dataset I have constructed. By examining the data, I attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the entire series of incidents and gain a deeper understanding of the protest's unique features and dynamics.

# 5. Investigation into Protest Activity

## *5.1 Classification of Protests by Expressed Purpose*

This thesis initially attempted to collect data from China Dissent Monitor, which belongs to Freedom House. However, after sorting, it was found that China Dissent Monitor recorded only 69 protest incidents on November 26 and 27, 2022, of which four were irrelevant incidents related to pay and benefits and fraud. Moreover, the data sources are mostly Weibo posts and reports from China Digital Times (CDT). Given the stringent censorship in China's information network, Weibo lacks sufficient samples. CDT's reports are highly susceptible to bias.

Therefore, I began starting with primary sources to create a dataset of protests. The Twitter (now X) account, "李老师不是你老师(Li Laoshi Is Not Your Teacher)," is well-known within the Chinese-speaking Twitter community, officially recognized by Twitter as a "Social Media Influencer." It is known for setting up an overseas "crowdsourced mailbox," and has long collected and forwarded a large amount of information "that cannot be reported within China." Following the fire in Urumqi, a significant number of public offline protest incidents occurred in China. The account Li Laoshi repeatedly was the first to publish exclusive videos submitted anonymously by netizens, making it an important source of information on the Chinese internet. In a short period, its followers doubled, reaching nearly 900,000 by the end of 2022. This thesis adopts the account's organized collection of all photos and video information for November 26-27, 2022, categorizing and recording them according to the time, groups involved, and purposes of the protests, in total 226 incidents.

I categorize the 226 cases into 9 types, according to protests purposes and method.

**Table 1：Protest Expression Typology**

| | Type | Explanation |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Zero-Covid Accident | Clear expression of dissatisfaction with pandemic mishandling (death or injury incidents). |
| 2 | Zero-Covid Policy | Clear expression of dissatisfaction with excessive pandemic prevention measures. |
| 3 | Personal Freedom | Clear expression of dissatisfaction with lockdown policies (restrictions on travel). |
| 4 | Freedom of Speech | Clear expression of dissatisfaction with information control. |
| 5 | Political Freedom | Clear expression, dissatisfaction with the government overall. |
| 6 | Common methods of protest in China | Includes singing and quoting famous sayings, the Constitution, and regulations. |
| 7 | Freedom | Unclear expression of desire for freedom, between clear slogans and "quasi blank paper". |
| 8 | Quasi-Blank Paper | Unclear expression, but novel expression of dissatisfaction. |
| 9 | Blank Paper | Clear non-expression, expression of dissatisfaction. |

## *5.2 Spatial Distribution of Protests in Four Time Periods, 26–27 November 2022*

The temporal evolution of the protests is examined through a structured division into four distinct phases, allowing for a systematic analysis of how the protests developed, intensified, and ultimately dissipated. This chronological approach captures critical turning points: (1) Emergence (morning of November 26 to 4 PM) when initial signs of mobilization appeared; (2) Escalation (4 PM to 11:30 PM), with particular focus on the gathering in front of Urumqi Middle Road in Shanghai, marking a shift in momentum; (3) Outbreak and Expansion (11:30 PM to 5 AM the next morning, continuing until 4 PM), characterized by mass participation and the geographic spread of protests; and (4) Dissipation (from 4 PM on November 27 to 2:30 AM on November 28), when protests began to subside. By coding the protest data within these timeframes, I generated five heatmaps to illustrate the evolving intensity, geographic patterns, and diffusion mechanisms of the demonstrations at a national level.

This method provides a clear visualization of how the protests transitioned from isolated

incidents into a widespread movement before gradually winding down.

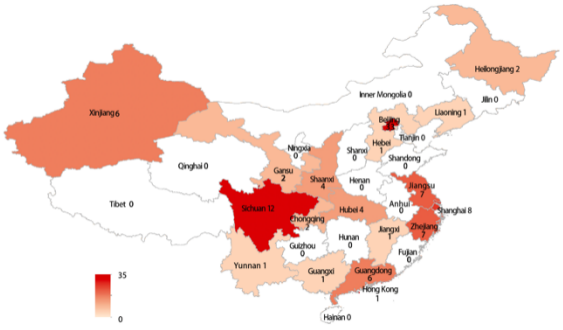


**Figure 3: Protest Heatmap Time range 1**

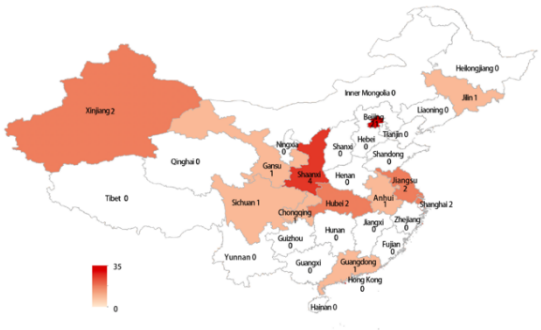


**Figure 4: Protest Heatmap Time range 2**

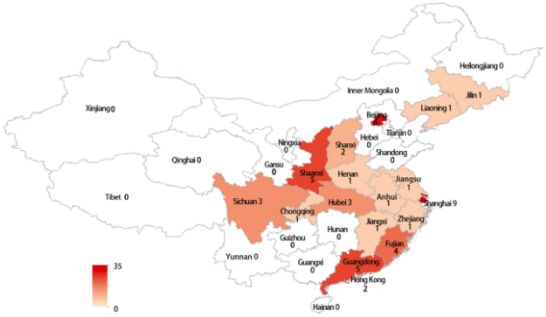


**Figure 5: Protest Heatmap Time Range 3**

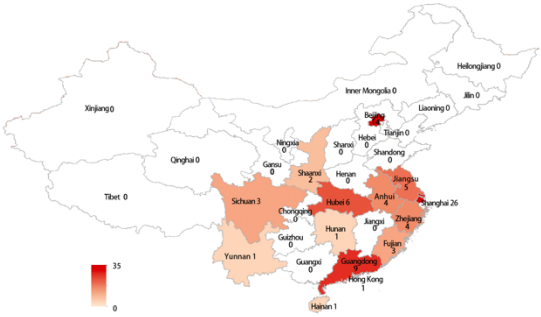


**Figure 6: Protest Heatmap Time Range 4**

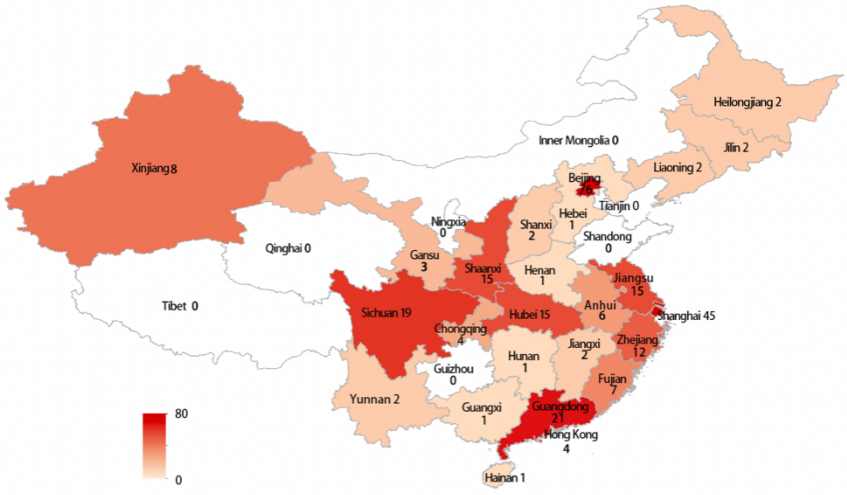


**Figure 7: Protest Heatmap in total**

The thesis categorizes protest intensity into five levels, progressing from subtle acts of dissent to direct confrontation. At the lowest level, protesters simply posted blank papers as a symbolic gesture. More explicit expressions followed, including installation art and the display of demand

slogans. Some demonstrations incorporated performance art, where participants held blank papers alongside banners with explicit messages. As the movement escalated, public singing and mourning rituals became part of the protests, transforming gatherings into collective acts of defiance. At the highest intensity, protesters not only carried blank papers but also engaged in direct confrontation, forming large crowds that openly challenged authorities.

Protest locations are also classified based on their visibility and symbolic weight. In more concealed settings, demonstrations took place in private or semi-private spaces, such as dormitories, toilets, and residential areas. Universities became another key site of mobilization, where students played a central role in organizing demonstrations. Beyond campuses, protests spread to streets, theaters, shopping malls, hospitals, and public squares, marking a shift toward broader public participation. The most politically charged locations included sites of direct relevance to the movement, such as Urumqi Middle Road, historical statues, places tied to the original crisis (Xinjiang), and government offices—each carrying heightened symbolic and political significance.

By analyzing both protest intensity and location, the thesis identifies four overarching patterns. Some protests were highly intense but took place in confined areas, where small groups engaged in strong acts of defiance. Others were similarly localized but remained low in intensity, with minimal confrontation. In contrast, large-scale mobilization was seen in major public spaces, where either high-intensity protests erupted into mass demonstrations or low-intensity protests drew widespread participation while maintaining a restrained approach. This framework helps clarify how the movement adapted to different environments, balancing risk, visibility, and strategic objectives.

**Table 2: Distribution of protest type by protest intensity**

| Intensity | Zero-COVID Accident | Policy Dissatisfaction | Personal Freedom | Freedom of Speech | Political Freedom | Common Protest Methods | General Freedom | Quasi-Blank Paper | Blank Paper | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High | 20 | 23 | 62 | 15 | 9 | 33 | 23 | 4 | 36 | 225 |
| Low | 37 | 20 | 12 | 43 | 4 | 22 | 16 | 13 | 5 | 172 |
| Total | 57 | 43 | 74 | 58 | 13 | 55 | 39 | 17 | 41 | 397 |

**Table 3: Distribution of protest type by protest sites**

| Protest Site | Zero-COVID Accident | Policy Dissatisfaction | Personal Freedom | Freedom of Speech | Political Freedom | Common Protest Methods | General Freedom | Quasi-Blank Paper | Blank Paper | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Private/ Low Visibility Sites | 1 | 5 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 38 |
| Universities | 49 | 23 | 14 | 46 | 5 | 30 | 13 | 16 | 17 | 213 |
| Public Spaces | 5 | 13 | 35 | 8 | 6 | 15 | 14 | 1 | 16 | 113 |
| Symbolic Public Sites | 2 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 0 | 8 | 33 |
| Total | 57 | 43 | 74 | 58 | 13 | 55 | 39 | 17 | 41 | 397 |

Building on the data from the heat map, Table 1, Table 2, and Table A.1. (in Appendix A), this section examines the evolution of protest activity across four distinct time ranges, analyzing them through the lenses of time, space, demands, and protest patterns.

Time range 1, from the morning of November 26th to 4 PM, marks the initial emergence of the Blank Paper protests. At this stage, activities remain scattered and low in intensity, primarily taking the form of symbolic gestures like posting blank papers and small-scale artistic expressions. Rather than direct confrontation, the early demonstrations are characterized by individualized, cautious dissent. The protests are concentrated in a limited number of cities, with Beijing and Shanghai serving as the primary hubs. However, these actions remain largely isolated, with no clear regional connectedness. Beijing, in particular, registers the highest intensity of protest, likely due to its political significance and heightened state surveillance.

At this stage, the core demands of the protests remain centered on personal rights, particularly freedom of speech. Grievances are still largely individualized, not yet crystallizing into broader calls for institutional or systemic reform. The protest patterns reflect this early phase of mobilization—low-intensity, localized, and confined to relatively controlled spaces such as university campuses. The decentralized and cautious nature of these initial demonstrations suggests that participants were still probing the limits of permissible dissent, testing how far expressions of discontent could go before triggering state repression.

Time range 2, from November 26th at 4 PM to 11:30 PM, protest activity undergoes a clear escalation. The number of incidents rises sharply, accompanied by a shift toward higher-intensity forms of dissent, including organized rallies and public chanting of slogans. What was initially a fragmented and scattered phenomenon now begins to take shape as a more structured movement. The spatial distribution also changes significantly—Shanghai emerges as a major center of mobilization alongside Beijing, forming a "dual-center" pattern of protest. Simultaneously, regions such as Xinjiang, Sichuan, and Hubei experience noticeable surges in protest activity, indicating

that the movement is no longer confined to isolated urban pockets but is spreading more widely.

The nature of demands also begins to evolve. While personal rights remain a focal point, there is a growing emphasis on broader political issues, including critiques of governance structures and calls for civil rights. This shift suggests an increasing willingness among participants to challenge not just specific COVID-19 measures but also the underlying mechanisms of policy enforcement. However, despite this intensification, the overall protest landscape remains mixed—while large-scale, high-intensity demonstrations like those on Urumqi Middle Road gain prominence, the majority of activities still follow the lower-intensity, localized patterns seen in the initial phase. The movement is now at a turning point, balancing between its origins as a scattered expression of frustration and its potential transformation into a more coordinated force of resistance.

Time range 3, between November 27th at 11:30 PM and the following morning at 5 AM, the Blank Paper protests reached its climax, with demonstrations intensifying nationwide. Protest methods escalated from symbolic acts to large-scale assemblies, marches, and memorials, reflecting a shift from individual expression to collective resistance.

Spatially, protests spread beyond initial urban centers, with Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou emerging as key hubs while central and western regions saw increased participation. The movement also became more interconnected across regions, reinforcing a sense of collective mobilization.

Demands evolved, with personal rights concerns merging with political and institutional grievances, creating a multi-faceted protest landscape. High-intensity, organized demonstrations became the dominant form, while localized, low-intensity protests continued in parallel.

Time range 4, between November 27th at 4 PM and November 28th at 2:30 AM, protests began to subside, with fewer events but persistent intensity in some areas. Shanghai overtook Beijing as the primary protest site, while activity in central and western provinces declined.

Demands remained diverse but shifted more toward political and institutional concerns, with personal rights taking a backseat. Large-scale demonstrations decreased, but low-intensity,

localized protests persisted, reflecting ongoing discontent even as mass mobilization faded.

Table 1 reveals a clear correlation between protest intensity and demand type. High-intensity protests are dominated by demands for personal freedom, reflecting widespread frustration with strict lockdown measures. As control tightened, public anger escalated into collective actions like rallies and chanting, making personal freedom the central grievance.

In contrast, low-intensity protests are primarily focused on freedom of speech, indicating that early-stage dissatisfaction was largely driven by restrictions on information and expression. Protesters in these cases adopted subtler methods—such as posting statements or hanging banners—rather than direct confrontation.

A notable trend is the increased presence of political demands in high-intensity protests. While political grievances remain a minority of overall demands, their emergence suggests that as conflicts intensified, frustrations expanded beyond specific policies to broader systemic concerns.

Table 2 highlights how different locations shaped protest priorities. Personal freedom was the dominant demand across all sites, though its prevalence varied. High-impact zones (Area 3)—such as commercial centers, public squares, and key urban sites—saw the strongest push for personal freedom, followed closely by residential areas (Area 1), where daily life was most disrupted by lockdowns. Meanwhile, university campuses (Area 2) emerged as hubs for free speech advocacy, reinforcing the role of students as early mobilizers focused on expression rather than direct confrontation.

Although iconic locations (Area 4) hosted smaller-scale protests, they registered a higher proportion of political demands. This suggests that protests in these sites were symbolically charged, drawing participants with broader political concerns. Addressing these varied grievances requires localized policy adjustments rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

## *5.3 Four Patterns of Protest, by Intensity and Protest Site*

**Table 4: Number and percentage change of school and social protests on the 26th and 27th in each province**

| Province | 2022-11-26 School | 2022-11-27 School | 2022-11-26 Society | 2022-11-27 Society | School Diff | Society Diff |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anhui | 0 | 5 | 1 | 0 | N/A | -100.00% |
| Beijing | 36 | 11 | 17 | 12 | -69.44% | 1100.00% |
| Chongqing | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | -50.00% | -100.00% |
| Fujian | 0 | 6 | 0 | 1 | N/A | N/A |
| Gansu | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | N/A | -100.00% |
| Guangdong | 4 | 5 | 3 | 9 | 25.00% | 800.00% |
| Guangxi | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -100.00% | N/A |
| Hainan | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | N/A | N/A |
| Hebei | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -100.00% | N/A |
| Heilongjiang | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -100.00% | N/A |
| Henan | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | N/A | N/A |
| HongKong | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 200.00% | N/A |
| Hubei | 4 | 2 | 2 | 7 | -50.00% | 600.00% |
| Hunan | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | N/A | N/A |
| Jiangsu | 9 | 2 | 0 | 4 | -77.78% | N/A |
| Jiangxi | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | N/A | -100.00% |
| Jianngsu | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -100.00% | N/A |
| Jilin | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0.00% | N/A |
| Liaoning | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0.00% | N/A |
| Shaanxi | 8 | 5 | 0 | 2 | -37.50% | N/A |
| Shandong | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | -33.33% | N/A |
| Shanghai | 6 | 9 | 3 | 27 | 50.00% | 2600.00% |
| Shanxi | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | N/A | N/A |
| Shenyang | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | N/A | N/A |
| Sichuan | 9 | 4 | 4 | 2 | -55.56% | 100.00% |
| Tianjin | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Xinjiang | 0 | 0 | 8 | 0 | N/A | -100.00% |
| Yunnan | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | -100.00% | N/A |

**Table 5: Number of different types of school protests and their average intensity in each province**

| Province | Zero-COVID Accident | Policy Dissatisfaction | Personal Freedom | Freedom of Speech | Political Freedom | Common Protest Methods | General Freedom | Quasi-Blank Paper | Blank Paper | Protest Intensity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anhui | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3.8 |
| Beijing | 8 | 7 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 13 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 2.2 |
| Chongqing | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2.3 |
| Fujian | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2.2 |
| Guangdong | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3.4 |
| Guangxi | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Hainan | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Hebei | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Heilongjiang | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Henan | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| HongKong | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2.3 |
| Hubei | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2.8 |
| Jiangsu | 4 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2.7 |
| Jiangxi | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Jianngsu | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Jilin | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Liaoning | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2.5 |
| Shaanxi | 3 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2.5 |
| Shandong | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2.2 |
| Shanghai | 7 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2.2 |
| Shenyang | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Sichuan | 3 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2.8 |
| Tianjin | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2.5 |
| Yunnan | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Zhejiang | 2 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2.2 |

**Table 6: Number of different types of society protests and their average intensity in each province**

| Province | Zero-COVID Accident | Policy Dissatisfaction | Personal Freedom | Freedom of Speech | Political Freedom | Common Protest Methods | General Freedom | Quasi-Blank Paper | Blank Paper | Protest Intensity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anhui | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Beijing | 2 | 7 | 20 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 0 | 4 | 4.72 |
| Chongqing | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Fujian | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Gansu | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Guangdong | 0 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Hubei | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4.89 |
| Hunan | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Jiangsu | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2.75 |
| Jiangxi | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Shaanxi | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Shanghai | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 8 | 1 | 5 | 4.47 |
| Shanxi | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4.5 |
| Sichuan | 3 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3.833 |
| Tianjin | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Xinjiang | 0 | 1 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Yunnan | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Zhejiang | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3.33 |

Tables 3, 4, and 5 examines the dramatic expansion of protest activity and the distinct trajectories of school-based and societal demonstrations.

Initially, universities served as the primary sites of mobilization, with 98 school protests recorded on November 26th, compared to 44 in broader society. However, by November 27th, this pattern reversed—school protests declined to 65, while societal protests surged to 77. This shift signals that the movement, which began in controlled environments like campuses, had broken into the public sphere, accelerating its reach and intensity.

At a national level, the total number of protests skyrocketed from 142 on the 26th to 442 on the 27th, more than tripling within 24 hours. The sheer speed of escalation suggests that grievances had been simmering beneath the surface, waiting for a trigger to erupt. The Blank Paper protests was not a slow-building movement but an explosive moment of release, fueled by accumulated frustration and the sudden opening of space for collective action.

This evolution—from localized to widespread, from campus to society, from spontaneous expression to organized resistance—illustrates how the movement transcended its initial scope, rapidly transforming into a broad-based social mobilization.

Table 4 illustrates how school-based protests evolved from personal grievances into collective mobilization. Initially, student demands centered on personal freedoms (35 incidents) and freedom of speech (42 incidents), reflecting concerns over individual rights. However, these protests rapidly transitioned from isolated acts to organized actions, including rallies and marches, laying the groundwork for broader societal escalation. Notably, institutions in politically sensitive areas—such as Beijing and Nanjing University of Media—exhibited above-average protest intensity, suggesting that certain universities acted as early catalysts for mobilization.

Unlike school protests, which initially emphasized personal rights, societal demonstrations, as shown in Table 5, were more structural and politically charged. Demands expanded to civil rights (10 incidents) and political freedoms (8 incidents), indicating a shift from individual concerns to

systemic grievances. The participation base also diversified, extending beyond students to include broader segments of society. Geographically, protests were widespread, but the eastern coastal provinces—especially Shanghai and Beijing—saw the most intense mobilization. This suggests that areas with stronger economic development and deeper societal divisions were more prone to social contention, reinforcing their role as protest epicenters.

Initially, the dynamics of school and societal protests remained distinct—with campuses favoring low-intensity actions like petitions, while societal protests escalated into high-intensity demonstrations and marches. However, as the movement gained momentum, these boundaries blurred, leading to a synchronized wave of dissent. In many regions, protests erupted almost simultaneously across campuses and public spaces, signaling a convergence of strategies and a shared front against pandemic restrictions. The increasing alignment between student movements and broader societal resistance underscores how the Blank Paper protests evolved from isolated acts of defiance into a nationwide mobilization.

## *5.4 Summary of Characteristics and Dynamics of Protests*

Drawing from Table 6, which outlines the distribution of different protest patterns across provinces, this section examines how protests were organized and mobilized in varying settings. By analyzing these dynamics, we gain deeper insight into the mechanisms that shaped the Blank Paper protests' spread and intensity.

One distinct pattern1, involves high-intensity demonstrations within small, concentrated areas, often serving as localized flashpoints of protest activity. These events, seen in places like Nanjing University of Media, exhibit a strong and urgent demonstration effect despite their spatial limitations. Protesters in these settings employ bold and confrontational tactics, escalating tensions rapidly and amplifying visibility.

**Table 7: Distribution of the number of different protest patterns across provinces**

| Province | Private/Low Visibility Sites | Universities | Public Spaces | Symbolic Public Sites |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anhui | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Beijing | 17 | 42 | 16 | 1 |
| Chongqing | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Fujian | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Gansu | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Guangdong | 6 | 3 | 12 | 0 |
| Guangxi | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Hainan | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Hebei | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Heilongjiang | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Henan | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| HongKong | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Hubei | 4 | 3 | 8 | 0 |
| Hunan | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Jiangsu | 4 | 6 | 4 | 1 |
| Jiangxi | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Jianngsu | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Jilin | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Liaoning | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Shaanxi | 5 | 8 | 2 | 0 |
| Shandong | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Shanghai | 2 | 13 | 28 | 2 |
| Shanxi | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Shenyang | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Sichuan | 5 | 9 | 4 | 1 |
| Tianjin | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Xinjiang | 2 | 0 | 6 | 0 |
| Yunnan | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Zhejiang | 1 | 8 | 3 | 0 |

Geographically, such protests were concentrated in developed coastal provinces, particularly Jiangsu and Guangdong. This suggests that economically advanced and densely populated areas provided fertile ground for mobilization, where heightened public engagement, stronger networks, and greater media access facilitated rapid escalation of dissent. These flashpoint protests, despite their confined physical scope, played a pivotal role in setting the tone for broader resistance, fueling momentum that extended beyond their immediate locations.

Pattern 2, which is Low-Intensity, Small-Area Protests: Scattered and Individualized Dissent. This pattern represents the most fundamental form of protest activity, primarily taking shape

through individual or small-group actions such as posting messages, displaying blank papers, or engaging in symbolic performances. These protests are highly dispersed and decentralized, making them difficult to track or suppress. Unlike large-scale demonstrations, they lack immediate visibility, but their widespread presence across nearly all provinces signals a broad yet latent dissatisfaction.

Despite their lower intensity, these seemingly "mild" acts of resistance serve as a crucial foundation for future mobilization. When catalyzed by external events—such as the Urumqi fire—they can rapidly escalate into larger, more coordinated actions, providing the groundwork for organized protest waves. Their covert and dispersed nature allows them to persist under tight restrictions, ensuring that discontent remains continuously expressed, albeit in a fragmented form.

The pattern 3, at the other extreme, large-scale, high-intensity protests—such as those on Urumqi Middle Road in Shanghai—serve as the "eye of the storm" in the movement. These events are not only spatially expansive but also sustained and highly disruptive, drawing widespread attention and shaping the overall trajectory of the protests.

Geographically, these mass mobilizations were concentrated in megacities like Beijing and Shanghai, highlighting the role of political and cultural centers, as well as economic and social hubs, in shaping large-scale resistance. Their strong mobilization capacity and visibility allow them to quickly draw in participants from surrounding areas, reinforcing momentum and interconnectivity between protest sites. While protests in smaller areas signal dissatisfaction, it is these large, intense mobilizations that define the movement’s peak moments, setting the tone for nationwide dissent.

Pattern 4, which is Low-Intensity, Large-Area Protests. This pattern represents a conventional and persistent mode of dissent, where grievances are expressed through low-risk yet widespread actions such as posting slogans in public spaces, distributing flyers, or symbolic gestures that remain within legal gray zones. Unlike high-intensity protests that attract immediate suppression, these methods maintain steady visibility in the public sphere, allowing for the continuous

expression of dissatisfaction without provoking direct confrontation.

These forms of protest are not isolated incidents but part of a broader strategy, ensuring that public grievances remain present in everyday spaces while avoiding escalation into direct clashes with authorities. Their expansive reach across multiple regions and social groups makes them a foundational element of the movement, sustaining momentum even when mass mobilizations subside.

Taken together, these four patterns illustrate how the Blank Paper protests evolved through a dynamic interplay of intensity and scale. While low-intensity acts kept discontent simmering in everyday life, high-intensity mobilizations served as flashpoints for mass participation. This layered structure allowed the movement to adapt to repression, spread across diverse regions, and sustain itself beyond its peak moments. Understanding these dynamics is essential to grasp how public sentiment was expressed, amplified, and ultimately shaped the trajectory of the movement.

# 6. Analyzing the Impact of COVID-19 Policy

## *6.1 Previous Studies*

Understanding public attitudes toward government policies during the pandemic requires a closer examination of political trust and policy compliance in China. Political trust, often framed as institutional confidence, reflects citizens' perceptions of the government's legitimacy, effectiveness, and fairness (Zhao & Zhang, 2025). While political trust is generally stable and long-term, policy compliance is more situational shaped by the nature of the policy, enforcement mechanisms, and immediate societal conditions (Guan et al., 2024; Kang & Cho, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly China's Zero-COVID policy, presents a critical case for analyzing how trust and compliance interact, especially in an authoritarian system where state narratives, censorship, and coercion play key roles (Chan, 2023; Fahimi, 2023).

Existing studies suggest that public trust in China's government was initially high due to its rapid and effective containment of COVID-19 in 2020 (Huang et al., 2022; Xu, 2022). The success of early lockdowns reinforced a state-led narrative that emphasized the superiority of China's governance model over Western alternatives, fostering compliance through a combination of nationalism and crisis mobilization (Dessein & Roctus, 2022). However, as the pandemic extended into late 2022, widespread fatigue, economic hardships, and policy inconsistencies led to an erosion of this trust. The Blank Paper protests emerged as a reaction to these frustrations; yet this political nature remains contested. While some scholars argue that the Blank Paper protests were China's most significant political protest since 1989, fueled by demands for freedom and democracy (Fahimi, 2023), others contend that their primary objective was far less revolutionary and focused instead on pragmatic calls for policy adjustment rather than systemic change (Chan & Lee, 2024).

A key puzzle in the literature is the rapid resolution of the Blank Paper protests. Unlike historical anti-government protests, the movement subsided almost immediately after the government lifted Zero-COVID restrictions in December 2022. This outcome challenges the

argument that the Blank Paper protests were fundamentally a pro-democracy uprising; rather, it suggests that public dissatisfaction was rooted in the extreme enforcement of lockdowns rather than a rejection of state authority itself (Keng et al., 2023). This is further reflected in political trust data—while local governments bore the brunt of criticism for implementing harsh restrictions, trust in the central government remained relatively intact, indicating a nuanced differentiation between policy discontent and regime opposition (Guan et al., 2024; Kang & Cho, 2024).

Moreover, studies on authoritarian crisis governance emphasize that state legitimacy is not solely maintained through coercion but also through adaptability (Thornton, 2022; Keng et al., 2023). The swift policy shift after the Blank Paper protests demonstrates that China's government was willing to recalibrate its approach to preempt deeper political instability. This aligns with broader discussions on the costs of enforcement: as compliance becomes more difficult, governments must either escalate repression or make policy concessions to restore social stability (Ong, 2023).

In addition to political trust, the role of economic conditions in shaping public sentiment cannot be ignored. Data from the 2021 and 2022 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) indicate that economic hardship was a key driver of discontent. While national-level dissatisfaction with Zero-COVID grew, regions like Wuhan and Guangzhou—despite being hotspots for protests—did not exhibit the same levels of political distrust as Beijing or Shanghai. This discrepancy suggests that grievances in different regions varied significantly, with economic distress being a major factor in some cities, while in others, frustration stemmed primarily from the lack of transparency and accountability in pandemic governance (Fahimi, 2023).

## *6.2 Reported Impact on Daily Life*

As shows in table 7, the impact of COVID-19 on daily life intensified from 2021 to 2022, particularly reflected in the increase in the proportion of respondents reporting "severe disruption" (+5.4%) and "moderate disruption" (+4.0%). This suggests that as the Zero-COVID policy

persisted, public tolerance diminished, and societal pressures mounted. However, this impact varied across different regions, with particularly pronounced disruptions in all cities where large protests occurred, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Wuhan. In regions where the Blank Paper Protests were more prevalent, such as Beijing and Shanghai, the impact of COVID-19 was significantly higher than the national average, suggests a strong association between prolonged lockdown measures and heightened public discontent.

**Table 8: Perceived Impact of COVID-19 on Daily Life, National and Regional Comparison in 2022, Percent**

| Response Category | 2021 | 2022 | Difference | Beijing | Shanghai | Guangdong | Hubei |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Severe Disruption | 7.6 | 12.9 | +5.4 | 20.3 | 26.2 | 13.0 | 13.0 |
| Moderate Disruption | 23.4 | 27.5 | +4.0 | 32.1 | 28.6 | 27.4 | 27.5 |
| Slight Impact | 36.2 | 30.2 | -5.9 | 25.1 | 31.0 | 30.4 | 30.3 |
| Minimal Impact | 17.8 | 14.0 | -3.9 | 13.4 | 7.14 | 14.0 | 13.8 |
| Barely Affected | 11.8 | 10.7 | -1.0 | 7.0 | 5.56 | 10.5 | 10.8 |
| No Impact at All | 3.3 | 4.7 | +1.4 | 2.1 | 1.59 | 4.73 | 4.7 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | / | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

In Beijing, the proportion of respondents reporting "severe disruption" reached 20.3%, markedly exceeding the national average of 12.91%, while 32.1% of respondents experienced "moderate disruption" (Table 10). This suggests that daily life restrictions in Beijing were more stringent than in most other regions. The prolonged and highly controlled enforcement of Zero-COVID policies, including frequent lockdowns and movement restrictions, likely exacerbated public frustration and contributed to the accumulation of grievances that later manifested in protest activity.

Shanghai exhibited an even more pronounced level of disruption. The percentage of respondents who reported "severe disruption" was at 26.2%, about twice the national average. Shanghai's extensive lockdown measures, particularly during the city-wide quarantine in early

2022, led to severe logistical challenges, food shortages, and difficulties in accessing medical care. The mismanagement of these crises further compounded societal stress, fueling public frustration and, eventually, organized demonstrations.

Other regions—including Guangdong and Hubei, where protests also occurred—reported significantly lower levels of disruption. In both provinces, approximately 13% of respondents indicated "severe disruption," in line with the national average (see Table 8). The relatively lower impact on daily life suggests that while restrictions were still in place, enforcement may have been more flexible, mitigating widespread dissatisfaction. This is consistent with the observation that while protests emerged in these regions, they were often more localized and issue-specific rather than large-scale demonstrations against the overall pandemic policy.

Compared to Beijing and Shanghai, where the impact of COVID-19 restrictions was significantly higher, in Guangdong and Hubei, the data suggest that pandemic-related disruptions in daily life were not as pronounced.

In Guangdong, the proportion of respondents reporting “severe disruption” (13.0%) and “moderate disruption” (27.4%) was close to the national average. This indicates that while Zero-COVID policies affected daily routines, the overall pressure did not reach the levels seen in cities with more rigid lockdown enforcement. Unlike northern cities, where prolonged, stringent restrictions fueled frustration, Guangdong’s relatively flexible approach to containment measures may have alleviated some of the public’s discontent, reducing the need for large-scale protests.

Hubei, particularly Wuhan, shows an even more notable trend. Despite being the first epicenter of the pandemic, its “severe disruption” rate (13.0%) was actually lower than the national average. This suggests that by 2022, life in Wuhan had largely returned to normal, and the extreme hardships experienced in 2020 had ended. Unlike Shanghai, which faced a prolonged and chaotic lockdown, Wuhan did not undergo another wave of severe restrictions in 2022. This may also explain why, despite the presence of protests, overall satisfaction with the government’s handling of the pandemic remained relatively high in Hubei.

## *6.3 Did Impact on Daily Life Drive the Protests?*

The data suggest that the severe impact of COVID-19 on daily life may have been a critical backdrop for the outbreak of protests, particularly in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, where strict lockdown measures caused significant disruption. However, the relationship between pandemic-related hardships and the occurrence of protests is not entirely straight.

First, greater impact on daily life is not necessarily associated with protests. In regions like Guangdong and Hubei, where residents experienced lockdown measures, the report severity of their impact on daily life was much lower than in Beijing and Shanghai. Yet, protests occurred in these areas. This suggests that protest mobilization was not purely a reaction to worsening living conditions but also stemmed from frustration with the execution of lockdown policies, including the arbitrary nature of restrictions, excessive enforcement, and information control.

Second, less discontent to daily life does not necessarily mean no protests. In Hubei, Wuhan, for example, saw protests despite reporting a lower level of disruption compared to cities like Shanghai. This suggests that the emergence of protests was not solely driven by personal hardships, but was closely tied to local expectations of policy adjustments, perceptions of government responsiveness, and broader societal sentiment. The case of Wuhan highlights that even where daily life had more or less stabilized, public frustration could still manifest in protest when policy implementation deviated from public expectatio***ns.***

## *6.4 Reported Impact on Income*

As shows in Table 8, The economic consequences of the pandemic worsened from 2021 to 2022, as the proportion of people experiencing a significant income decrease rose from 17.58% to 23.11% (+5.53%) (Table 15, in Appendix). At the same time, the share of respondents reporting no change in income declined by 5.22%, reflecting the increasing strain on personal finances due to extended lockdowns and economic slowdowns. Despite these financial hardships, the connection between income loss and protest participation is complex.

**Table 9: Income Impact - National and Regional Comparison Between 2021 & 2022, Percent**

| Response Category | 2021 | 2022 | Difference | Beijing | Shanghai | Guangdong | Hubei |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lost All Income | 2.4 | 2.9 | +0.5 | 1.1 | 4.0 | 2.9 | 3.0 |
| Significant Decrease | 17.6 | 23.1 | +5.5 | 18.7 | 16.7 | 22.8 | 23.1 |
| Slight Decrease | 40.9 | 41.6 | +0.7 | 46.5 | 41.3 | 41.5 | 41.6 |
| No Change | 29.3 | 24.0 | -5.2 | 32.6 | 34.9 | 5.1 | 24.1 |
| Slight Increase | 7.1 | 5.0 | -2.0 | 0.535 | 1.6 | 2.1 | 4.9 |
| Significant Increase | 2.5 | 2.2 | -0.3 | 0 | 1.6 | 2.1 | 2.2 |
| Multiplied Income | 0.3 | 1.1 | +0.8 | 0.535 | 0 | 1.0 | 1.2 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | / | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Beijing and Shanghai, which saw the largest protests during the Blank Paper protests, did not experience the highest levels of income loss compared to other regions. In Beijing, only 1.1% reported losing all income, significantly lower than the national average of 2.9% (Table 20, in Appendix). Additionally, while 46.5% of respondents in Beijing reported a slight decrease in income—higher than the national average of 41.6%—32.6% reported no income change, 9.0% higher than the national figure. Similarly, Shanghai had a lower rate of significant income decrease (16.7%) than the national average (23.1%) and a higher proportion (34.9%) reporting no income change (Table 21, in Appendix). These findings suggest that protests in Beijing and Shanghai were not purely driven by economic desperation, but rather by broader frustrations with lockdown policies, governance failures, and restrictions on daily life.

Guangdong and Hubei provide a contrasting case, where income losses were comparable to or even greater than in protest-heavy cities, yet dissatisfaction did not escalate to the same level of unrest. In Guangdong, 22.8% reported a significant income decrease, approaching the national average, while 71.01% experienced income losses overall (Table 22). In Hubei, 23.1% of respondents reported significant income reductions, higher than both Beijing and Shanghai (Table

23). However, neither province saw the same scale of anti-lockdown protests as Beijing or Shanghai. The resilience of public trust in these regions, particularly in Wuhan, may explain why economic grievances did not escalate into more widespread demonstrations.

## *6.5 Did Economic Hardship Drive Protests?*

The data indicate that while economic downturns contributed to public frustration, they were not along the primary drivers of the Blank Paper protests. The relationship between income loss and protest participation seems complex.

Income loss does not necessarily translate into protest participation. In provinces such as Hubei and Guangdong, where significant income declines were reported—comparable to or even exceeding those in protest-heavy cities—large-scale demonstrations did not materialize. This suggests that economic grievances alone were insufficient to trigger mass mobilization. Instead, dissatisfaction seemed to stem from broader issues related to policy enforcement, the unpredictability of lockdown measures, and public perceptions of government responsiveness.

Moreover, economic stability did not ensure social stability. In Beijing and Shanghai, where a higher proportion of respondents reported no change in income, protests erupted on a large scale. This challenges the assumption that financial security fosters compliance, superficially inclined that resistance to Zero-COVID policies was not primarily about economic hardship but about the lived experience of prolonged restrictions, mass quarantines, and growing dissatisfaction with governance failures.

How policies were implemented mattered more than financial losses themselves. The frustration that fueled protests was not solely due to economic difficulties but rather the arbitrary, excessive, and often chaotic nature of pandemic control measures. Prolonged lockdowns, inconsistent policy enforcement, and lack of transparency heightened public resentment, leading to a breaking point even in regions where income levels remained relatively stable.

These factors reinforce the argument that the Blank Paper protests were not an economic

grievance movement but a reaction against the broader governance failures of the Zero-COVID policy. The protests reflected a growing discontent with the lack of agency in daily life, the erosion of personal freedoms, and a demand for more predictable, humane, and transparent public health policies rather than a total rejection of pandemic control itself.

## *6.6 Reported Impact on Political Trust*

One of the most striking patterns in the data is the growing divergence in trust between different levels of government. This reflects a phenomenon often observed in crisis governance—when policies produce discontent, central authorities tend to be shielded from blame, while dissatisfaction is directed toward local implementation. In the context of Zero-COVID, while strict lockdowns, quarantine policies, and movement restrictions were national directives, their chaotic enforcement, excessive measures, and inconsistencies were largely the responsibility of local governments. As a result, rather than a uniform decline in government trust, the protests seemed to reflect frustration with specific failures of implementation rather than outright opposition to the state's pandemic strategy.

As shows in Table 10, while overall trust in both central and local governments remained relatively stable between 2021 and 2022, the gap between trust in the central government and trust in local governments widened. The mean trust difference increased from 0.49 in 2021 to 0.56 in 2022, indicating that, on average, citizens placed greater trust in the central government relative to local governments after a year of continued Zero-COVID enforcement.

The distribution of trust difference categories further supports this interpretation. The proportion of respondents who reported equal trust in central and local governments (0) remained relatively stable (41.4% in 2021, 43.9% in 2022), while the share of those expressing higher trust in the central government (positive values) increased. The number of respondents with extreme distrust in both levels of government (-4, -3) remained very low, suggesting that outright rejection of the government was not a dominant sentiment.

**Table 10: Trust Difference Distribution (2021 vs. 2022)**

| Trust Difference Category | 2021 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|
| -4 | 0.0538 | 0.1221 |
| -3 | 0.4307 | 0.2686 |
| -2 | 1.8304 | 0.9280 |
| -1 | 7.8331 | 4.7131 |
| 0 | 41.4266 | 43.8828 |
| 1 | 36.8506 | 38.6325 |
| 2 | 9.9327 | 9.7192 |
| 3 | 1.5074 | 1.5385 |
| 4 | 0.1346 | 0.1954 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

**Table 11: Trust Difference in Central vs. Local Government (Mean Values)**

| Year | Trust Difference |
|---|---|
| 2021 | 0.49 |
| 2022 | 0.56 |
| Total | 0.525(mean) |

However, the observed shift—especially in the decline of those reporting slightly lower trust in local governments (-1, -2) and the increase in those expressing a higher gap (1, 2)—suggests growing disillusionment with local authorities rather than an overall decline in institutional legitimacy. This aligns with reports from the Blank Paper protests, where dissatisfaction was frequently directed at the arbitrariness of local lockdowns, sudden quarantines, and inconsistent enforcement rather than at the national Zero-COVID policy itself.

## *6.7 Did the Political Trust Gap Drive Protests?*

The growing trust gap between central and local governments provides a plausible explanation for why protests erupted, despite continued support for pandemic control in principle. If the protests were purely driven by opposition to pandemic control, we would expect to see a collapse in trust across all levels of government, which is not the case. Instead, the protests appear to have been fueled by frustration with local governance failures—inefficiency, heavy-handed enforcement, and lack of responsiveness—rather than a wholesale rejection of the government or Zero-COVID as a policy. This also helps explain why the movement did not escalate into sustained political

opposition. Once the central government shifted its pandemic strategy, protests quickly subsided, as the primary grievances—related to local implementation rather than national policy direction—were addressed.

These findings reinforce the argument that the Blank Paper protests were not a revolutionary movement seeking to overturn the government but a reactive mobilization against the failures of local governance. The widening trust gap suggests that while the public became increasingly critical of local authorities, trust in the central government remained resilient, helping to contain the protest movement and prevent broader political radicalization.

## *6.8 Reported Satisfaction with COVID-19 Prevention Policies*

**Table 12: COVID-19 Policy Satisfaction - National and Regional Comparison Between 2021 & 2022**

| Response Category | 2021 | 2022 | Difference | Beijing | Shanghai | Guangdong | Hubei |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Dissatisfied | 2.8 | 4.6 | +1.8 | 12.3 | 12.7 | 4.7 | 4.7 |
| Dissatisfied | 4.5 | 4.5 | -0.03 | 5.4 | 11.1 | 4.3 | 4.4 |
| Neutral | 5.4 | 7.8 | +2.5 | 13.9 | 17.5 | 8.0 | 8.0 |
| Somewhat Satisfied | 11.0 | 11.7 | +0.8 | 13.9 | 8.7 | 11.3 | 11.7 |
| Satisfied | 31.1 | 30.4 | -0.7 | 33.7 | 25.4 | 30.8 | 30.4 |
| Very Satisfied | 45.3 | 41.0 | -4.3 | 20.9 | 24.6 | 40.8 | 40.8 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | / | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

The data on satisfaction with COVID-19 prevention policies reveals an intriguing pattern—while overall satisfaction with pandemic measures slightly declined from 2021 to 2022, the most dissatisfied groups were concentrated in cities where large-scale protests occurred. However, a decline in satisfaction does not automatically translate into political opposition, as dissatisfaction levels remained moderate, and a substantial portion of respondents still expressed support for the overall direction of the Zero-COVID policy.

Between 2021 and 2022, the percentage of respondents who were "very dissatisfied" rose from 2.8% to 4.6%, and those who were neutral increased from 5.4% to 7.8%, while the share of "very

satisfied" respondents declined from 45.3% to 41.0%. This shift suggests growing fatigue and frustration with the prolonged restrictions, but it does not indicate a wholesale collapse in public support. Instead, the largest segment of respondents (30.4%) remained "satisfied", implying that even as complaints increased, a majority still accepted the necessity of the policies.

A notable divergence in policy satisfaction emerges when comparing cities that witnessed large-scale protests, such as Beijing and Shanghai, with other regions. While dissatisfaction increased nationwide, its intensity varied significantly across locations, reinforcing the idea that grievances were not solely about Zero-COVID itself but about its enforcement and impact on daily life.

Beijing and Shanghai: These two cities exhibited substantially higher dissatisfaction levels than other regions. In Beijing, the proportion of respondents who were “very dissatisfied” reached 12.3%, nearly three times the national average (4.6%). Similarly, Shanghai recorded a 12.7% dissatisfaction rate, highlighting frustration with prolonged lockdowns, supply chain disruptions, and governance failures. Notably, both cities also had significantly higher neutrality rates—13.9% in Beijing and 17.5% in Shanghai—indicating growing uncertainty rather than outright rejection of the policy. This suggests that while discontent was widespread, much of it stemmed from execution failures rather than ideological opposition to Zero-COVID itself.

Guangdong and Hubei: In contrast, Guangdong and Hubei, despite also experiencing protests, exhibited much lower dissatisfaction levels compared to Beijing and Shanghai. The percentage of respondents who were “very dissatisfied” in Guangdong was 4.7%, closely aligned with the national average, while Hubei’s dissatisfaction was even lower at 4.7%. Furthermore, Hubei maintained a high level of policy satisfaction, with 40.8% of respondents reporting they were "very satisfied." This trend aligns with previous findings that regions with earlier pandemic exposure, such as Wuhan, had stronger policy approval, likely due to higher risk perception and greater adaptation to pandemic control measures.

These differences underscore a critical point: the intensity of dissatisfaction—and, by extension,

the likelihood of protests—was shaped not only by lockdown measures but also by the perceived fairness, predictability, and consistency of policy enforcement in different regions.

## *6.9. Did Dissatisfaction with Prevention Policies Drive Protests?*

The regional breakdown suggests that while dissatisfaction with pandemic policies contributed to unrest, it was not the sole or even the most decisive factor. If dissatisfaction alone were the driving force behind the Blank Paper protests, we would expect a direct correlation between dissatisfaction levels and protest intensity—yet the data suggests a more complex relationship.

While Beijing and Shanghai had the highest dissatisfaction rates, they also endured some of the strictest and longest lockdowns. The frustration in these cities was likely driven not just by opposition to Zero-COVID itself, but by governance failures—such as prolonged quarantines, chaotic food supply logistics, and inconsistent enforcement. In contrast, Guangdong and Hubei, despite experiencing protests, did not exhibit the same extreme dissatisfaction levels. This suggests that protests were not necessarily a result of broad public opposition to Zero-COVID, but rather reactions to specific enforcement failures or localized incidents of overreach.

If dissatisfaction alone explained the protests, we would expect no unrest in places where satisfaction remained high, such as Hubei—yet protests still occurred. This indicates that opposition was often directed at the way policies were implemented rather than at the policies themselves. Excessive restrictions, arbitrary lockdown extensions, and local enforcement inconsistencies appear to have played a larger role in mobilizing protest participation than generalized dissatisfaction with Zero-COVID.

Even in the most dissatisfied cities, no more than 12.7% of respondents identified as "very dissatisfied," while a majority still expressed some level of satisfaction. This suggests that the Blank Paper protests was not a full-scale rejection of China's pandemic policy, but rather a demand for more rational and humane enforcement. The sharp decline in protests following the government’s policy adjustments further supports this interpretation—once the primary grievances regarding

enforcement were addressed, the movement dissipated rapidly.

Ultimately, the evidence indicates that while policy dissatisfaction contributed to mobilization, the protests were not ideological uprisings against Zero-COVID itself, but rather expressions of frustration over its excessive, inconsistent, and sometimes arbitrary enforcement.

## *6.10 Perceived Severity of COVID-19 and Omicron Variant*

**Table 13: Comparison of Perceived Danger – COVID-19 (2021) vs. Omicron (2022)**

| Year & Variant | Weighted Average Danger Level (0-100) |
|---|---|
| 2021: COVID-19 | 74.3 |
| 2022: Omicron | 67.8 |
| Total | 71.1 (mean) |

The data reveals a notable decline in the perceived severity of COVID-19 from 2021 to 2022. The weighted average danger level dropped from 74.3 in 2021 to 67.8 in 2022. This shift suggests that as the pandemic progressed and the Omicron variant became dominant, public perception of the virus evolved, with fewer people viewing it as a severe health threat. The question, however, is whether this shift in risk perception contributed to the outbreak of protests.

Although public concern about COVID-19 decreased, this does not necessarily mean that most people outright rejected the necessity of pandemic policies. Surveys indicate that even in late 2022, a majority still supported maintaining some form of virus control measures. However, the decrease in perceived risk likely fueled frustration with continued strict enforcement of Zero-COVID policies—particularly in cities where prolonged lockdowns and mass testing campaigns remained in place despite growing international narratives that Omicron was milder.

At the start of the pandemic, strict lockdowns were broadly accepted as necessary to contain a dangerous and unknown virus. However, by 2022, as perceptions of Omicron's severity declined, the focus of public frustration shifted from the virus itself to the costs of containment policies. People began questioning why severe lockdowns were still being enforced despite decreasing fear of the virus. This misalignment between public perception and government policy likely

contributed to the sense that restrictions were no longer justified, adding momentum to public discontent.

In the early pandemic phase, the high perceived danger of COVID-19 legitimized harsh containment strategies, ensuring high levels of compliance. However, as perceived danger declined, the government's continued insistence on strict Zero-COVID measures became increasingly hard to justify in the eyes of the public. This erosion of legitimacy may have played a critical role in shifting public sentiment from passive compliance to active resistance. The protests, therefore, were not simply a rejection of public health policies but a demand for their rational adjustment in light of changing circumstances.

## *6.11 Did Severity of COVID-19 Drive Protests?*

The data suggests that declining fear of COVID-19 alone did not "cause" the protests, but it created conditions where public patience with extreme restrictions wore thin. The fundamental driver of unrest was not opposition to pandemic control itself, but rather a growing disconnects between public risk perception and government policy. As Omicron spread, many citizens likely felt that they were making unnecessary sacrifices for a risk that no longer seemed as severe—thus accelerating discontent and laying the groundwork for mobilization.

## *6.12 Reported Preferences for COVID-19 Prevention Methods*

One of the most counterintuitive findings in the data is that while dissatisfaction with Zero-COVID enforcement led to widespread protests, support for virus prevention policies actually increased from 2021 to 2022. The percentage of respondents who prioritized personal freedom and economic recovery dropped sharply from 54.0% in 2021 to 32.9% in 2022, while those favoring strict virus prevention policies rose from 43.7% to 67.1%. This raises a crucial question: if the majority of the public supported continued virus prevention, why did protests erupt against Zero-COVID?

At first glance, the simultaneous rise in support for virus prevention measures and the outbreak

of protests against Zero-COVID restrictions presents a contradiction. If a growing majority of the public in 2022 supported prioritizing virus prevention over personal freedom and economic recovery, why did large-scale demonstrations erupt? This paradox can be resolved by distinguishing between endorsement of pandemic control as a general principle and opposition to the excessive, rigid, or arbitrary enforcement of Zero-COVID policies. The protests were not necessarily a rejection of pandemic control itself, but rather an expression of frustration over how the policies were implemented rather than their underlying objectives. Several key observations emerge from this dynamic:

**Table 14: Policy Preference - National and Regional Comparison Between 2021 & 2022**

| Response Category | 2021 | 2022 | Difference | Beijing | Shanghai | Guangdong |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prioritize Personal Freedom & Economy | 54.0 | 32.9 | -21.1 | 37.4 | 32.8 | 34 |
| Prioritize Virus Prevention | 43.7 | 67.1 | 23.4 | 62.6 | 67.2 | 66 |
| Don't Know | 2.3 | 0 | -2.3 | / | / | / |
| Total | 100 | 100 | / | 100 | 100 | 100 |

The increase in public preference for virus prevention in 2022 does not necessarily indicate broad approval of the way Zero-COVID was enforced. Many individuals who participated in the protests were not opposing pandemic control altogether, but rather calling for a more rational, flexible, and humane approach to policy implementation. The perceived danger of COVID-19 also declined between 2021 and 2022, suggesting that as Omicron replaced earlier strains, many felt that extreme lockdown measures were no longer necessary. This shift in perception likely fueled growing discontent, as continued strict enforcement appeared increasingly disproportionate to the actual threat level.

Contrary to the assumption that protests were driven by individuals prioritizing personal freedom, survey data suggests that the cities with the largest demonstrations—Beijing and Shanghai—did not have the highest percentages of respondents advocating for personal freedom over virus prevention. In fact, only 37.4% in Beijing and 32.8% in Shanghai prioritized freedom

and the economy, percentages comparable to or even lower than the national average (Table 35 & 36). This challenges the narrative that the protests were purely ideological rejections of Zero-COVID. Instead, it suggests that dissatisfaction stemmed not from opposition to pandemic control itself, but rather from the excessive duration, arbitrary enforcement, and local governance failures that accompanied Zero-COVID measures in these cities.

Hubei, particularly Wuhan, exhibited the highest level of support for continued virus prevention (73.2%), significantly surpassing other regions. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that regions hit hardest in the early stages of the pandemic tend to develop stronger risk perceptions, making their residents more accepting of strict public health measures. While Wuhan did see protests, these were less about ideological resistance to Zero-COVID and more likely triggered by specific grievances—such as inconsistent enforcement, prolonged lockdowns, and logistical failures in local governance. In contrast to cities like Shanghai, where lockdown-related chaos directly affected a broad swath of residents, Wuhan's protests may have been more narrowly focused on localized enforcement failures rather than a fundamental rejection of the policy itself.

## *6.13 Did Dissatisfaction with Local Prevention Methods Drive Protests?*

The data reinforce the idea that the Blank Paper protests were not a rejection of pandemic control but a response to how Zero-COVID was implemented. Protests emerged in areas where policy enforcement was particularly disruptive, even when support for virus prevention remained strong. The key grievance was not the existence of public health measures, but the arbitrary, prolonged, and overly restrictive nature of enforcement. This distinction helps explain why protests faded so quickly after the government lifted extreme restrictions: once the source of frustration was removed, the broader policy of virus prevention was not fundamentally challenged.

# 7. Were the Blank Paper Protests a Revolutionary Political Movement?

The Blank Paper Protests were one of the most visible instances of public dissent in China in recent years, but they did not lay the groundwork for a revolution. While they reflected widespread dissatisfaction with Zero-COVID enforcement, they lacked the organizational structure, ideological foundation, and sustained mobilization necessary for revolutionary transformation. Rather than seeking to overthrow the government, protest participants primarily demanded a correction of policy implementation, reacting to the failures of local governance rather than rejecting the legitimacy of the state itself. To be more specific, they primarily aimed at demanding policy adjustments, exposing the contradictions within China's governance structure rather than outright rejecting it.

One of the defining features of revolutionary movements is broad-based opposition to the ruling regime. However, data from the CGSS survey and protest records suggest that public frustration was primarily directed at local-level implementation rather than at the state as a whole. The protests erupted in response to arbitrary enforcement, harsh lockdowns, and governance failures, but public trust in central authorities remained higher than trust in local governments. This indicates that most protesters were not rejecting the state's legitimacy but rather expressing discontent with how Zero-COVID policies were enforced at the grassroots level.

Paradoxically, even as dissatisfaction with local enforcement grew, support for pandemic control as a policy direction remained strong. Many protesters were not demanding an end to public health measures altogether, but rather a more reasonable, flexible, and humane approach.

Revolutions require organized leadership, sustained mobilization, and an alternative political vision—elements that the Blank Paper Protests lacked. The blank paper itself was a strategic choice—an ambiguous form of protest to avoid explicit political repression. However, this also meant that the movement did not articulate a concrete revolutionary agenda. Without a clear

ideological foundation or vision for systemic change, the protests remained focused on immediate grievances rather than long-term transformation.

If the protests had revolutionary potential, they would have escalated rather than disappearing once Zero-COVID measures were lifted. Historically, revolutions do not end simply because one policy is changed—they grow when deeper systemic issues remain unresolved. The fact that the protests lost momentum after the policy shift suggests that their core demand was a policy correction, not regime change.

Thus, the Blank Paper Protests were an unprecedented expression of public frustration, but they did not amount to a revolutionary movement. They pressured the government to adjust its policies rather than challenge its authority. The swift resolution of the protests once Zero-COVID was lifted reinforces the idea that they were situational rather than systemic—a reaction to extreme governance failures rather than an attempt to overthrow the state.

However, this moment of dissent was significant. It demonstrated that public compliance in authoritarian systems is conditional: people tolerated restrictions until they became inconsistent with daily life and perceived risk. While the protests may not have signaled a revolutionary turning point, they revealed the limits of public patience with authoritarian crisis governance. Thus, the Blank Paper Protests were not the foundation for a revolution. Instead, they were a powerful but temporary rupture, exposing how governance failures, public frustration, and grassroots enforcement shaped a unique moment of contention in contemporary China.

# 8. Limitations and Contributions

While this thesis provides an overarching analysis of the factors contributing to the Blank Paper protests, several limitations must be acknowledged. One major constraint lies in the reliance on survey data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) and publicly available online sources. Although these datasets offer valuable insights into public attitudes, they may not fully capture the lived experiences of all affected populations. Given the constraints of China's information environment, self-censorship and social desirability bias may have influenced responses, particularly in politically sensitive areas such as trust in government and satisfaction with pandemic policies. Respondents may have been reluctant to express strong dissatisfaction with state policies, potentially leading to an underestimation of the true extent of public discontent.

Another challenge is generalization of regional trends. While the data highlight broad national patterns, they do not fully reflect intra-regional variations. Cities such as Beijing and Shanghai exhibited higher dissatisfaction and protest activity, but grievances were not evenly distributed across all city districts. Similarly, while survey results indicate that Hubei had relatively high policy satisfaction, this does not suggest a complete absence of frustration. Localized grievances with specific enforcement measures—such as harsh lockdowns or inconsistent quarantine policies—may not be fully captured in provincial-level survey data.

Beyond survey-based limitations, this analysis relies significantly on protest documentation collected by the X (formerly Twitter) account "李老师不是你老师" (@whyyoutouzhele). This account is a key source due to its systematic aggregation of protest-related videos and firsthand testimonies, offering an alternative record of events largely absent from state-controlled media. However, the dataset remains inherently selective. The account holder attempted to verify submissions by cross-referencing different videos of the same incident, but as an independent actor without professional investigative resources, his ability to confirm authenticity was limited. As a result, the dataset is prone to selection bias, shaped not only by which protests were documented

but also by how the curator chose to frame the events. Without access to official statistics or a broader range of independent sources, the information reflects a fragmented and self-selecting subset of incidents, rather than a comprehensive overview of the protests.

Compounding this issue is the barrier of China's internet censorship mechanisms, commonly referred to as the Great Firewall. The individuals contributing to this dataset were, by default, those with the technical means to bypass restrictions and access platforms such as X. This self-selecting sample excludes perspectives from those who lacked either the ability or willingness to circumvent censorship, resulting in a dataset skewed toward digitally connected and politically engaged demographics. This limitation underscores the need for caution in interpreting protest trends solely based on their data, as they may not fully represent the broader societal response to the Zero-COVID policy.

In addition, while governance failures and protest activity appear closely linked, I have not established a direct causal relationship used research design or statistical methods to rule out alternatives to the story in this thesis. My findings are suggestive. The protests did not emerge simultaneously across all affected regions but were often triggered by specific incidents, such as the Urumqi fire. While dissatisfaction with Zero-COVID policies provided the backdrop for unrest, the immediate catalysts varied by region, complicating efforts to draw uniform conclusions about protest mobilization. Social networks, information diffusion, and external factors—such as the role of students, workers, and migrant populations—require further investigation.

Another limitation stems from the thesis's approach, which does not fully capture the informal and emotional dimensions of the protests. How citizens navigated censorship, communicated grievances, and coordinated demonstrations remains an area for further inquiry. Future research should integrate qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or digital discourse analysis, to provide a more nuanced understanding of protest mobilization.

The time frame of this research also presents a constraint. This analysis primarily examines the period leading up to and immediately following the policy shift away from Zero-COVID. However,

long-term political consequences remain uncertain. While the protests subsided rapidly after the government adjusted its pandemic strategy, it is unclear whether the frustrations expressed during the Blank Paper protests will have lasting effects on state-society relations in China. Future studies should track how political trust, governance expectations, and crisis management strategies evolve in the post-pandemic era to determine whether the events of 2022 were merely a temporary expression of frustration or indicative of a deeper shift in public expectations.

Despite these limitations, this thesis provides a multidimensional analysis of the Blank Paper Protests by integrating qualitative interpretation, case-based investigation, and quantitative analysis, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how public grievances translated into collective action. By employing diverse methodological approaches, this research moves beyond a singular narrative of revolutionary intent, instead highlighting the complex interplay between localized enforcement failures, shifting public sentiment, and protest mobilization dynamics.

A key contribution of this thesis is its incorporation of informal conversations with community officials in Wuhan and Shanghai, offering a rare, firsthand perspective on how Zero-COVID policies were enforced at the lowest administrative levels. These insights reveal the decentralized nature of policy implementation, where local administrators—who lacked discretionary authority—became the direct enforcers of pandemic control measures. Their accounts illustrate how ambiguous directives, operational constraints, and logistical failures turned grassroots governance into a frontline site of both enforcement and public frustration. This qualitative dimension enriches the broader analysis of governance failures, demonstrating how policy enforcement, rather than policy design, became the primary trigger for public discontent. By foregrounding the perspectives of those tasked with executing state directives, this thesis offers a nuanced account of how local-level governance shaped both compliance and resistance.

Beyond qualitative insights, this thesis constructs a self-compiled dataset of 226 protest incidents, systematically categorizing protests by time, location, intensity, and demand type. This approach enables a structured analysis of how the movement evolved across different regions and

protest sites. The study employs heatmaps and statistical distributions to trace the protests' temporal and spatial progression, identifying key epicenters and their correlation with governance dissatisfaction. By analyzing variations in protest intensity—from isolated symbolic acts to large-scale confrontations—this research provides an empirical foundation for understanding how and why certain locations became focal points for mobilization. Unlike anecdotal or fragmented reports, this dataset allows for a comparative assessment of protest dynamics, contributing to a more data-driven understanding of collective action under authoritarian constraints.

To contextualize the protests within broader societal trends, this thesis integrates large-scale public opinion data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). This analysis reveals a critical paradox: widespread dissatisfaction with Zero-COVID enforcement did not translate into large-scale collective action, and trust in the central government remained relatively resilient despite localized governance failures. By comparing regional variations in policy dissatisfaction, political trust, and economic hardship, this study systematically evaluates the gap between public grievances and actual protest participation. The findings indicate that while discontent was prevalent, factors such as risk perception, fear of repression, and protest efficacy shaped individual decisions to mobilize or remain passive. This quantitative approach strengthens the thesis's argument that the Blank Paper Protests were not a revolutionary movement, but a contingent reaction to governance failures exacerbated by prolonged crisis conditions.

By combining qualitative insights from informal conversations, empirical data from protest incidents, and large-scale public opinion analysis, this thesis offers a multi-dimensional perspective on the Blank Paper Protests, bridging the gap between individual grievances and collective mobilization. This triangulated methodology contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how public sentiment, governance failures, and state responses interacted during a critical moment of social contention in contemporary China.

# 9. Conclusion

The Blank Paper Protests of 2022 marked one of the most significant moments of public dissent in China in recent decades. However, rather than constituting a revolutionary movement aimed at systemic change, the protests primarily reflected widespread dissatisfaction with the rigid and arbitrary enforcement of Zero-COVID policies. By integrating qualitative interpretation through informal conversations, case-based investigation of protest activity, and quantitative analysis of public opinion trends, this thesis demonstrates that the movement was not a direct challenge to the Chinese state but rather a demand for policy adjustments, driven by governance failures at the local level.

A key finding of this thesis is that protest participation was not simply a function of economic hardship or generalized political discontent. While financial strain exacerbated frustration, the data suggest that protests were concentrated in cities where enforcement failures were most severe—such as Beijing and Shanghai—rather than in the regions hardest hit by economic downturns. The protests were fueled by the unpredictability and excessive nature of local lockdown enforcement, rather than a rejection of pandemic control itself. This explains why, even as dissatisfaction with Zero-COVID intensified, public trust in central governance remained relatively stable, with frustration directed primarily at local administrators rather than the overarching political system.

The rapid dissipation of the protests following the government's shift away from Zero-COVID policies further supports the argument that this was not a revolutionary moment, but a reactive mobilization. Unlike movements aimed at regime change, the Blank Paper Protests lacked sustained organizational structures, long-term strategic objectives, or an ideological framework advocating for systemic transformation. Protesters leveraged ambiguity in their messaging—such as the use of blank paper—to express grievances while avoiding explicit political confrontation. This strategic vagueness, while enabling broad participation, also limited the movement's ability to evolve into a sustained political challenge.

Moreover, the study of grassroots pandemic enforcement, particularly the role of the "Big Whites," highlights how Zero-COVID policies were decentralized to the lowest levels of governance. Local enforcers, who became the visible face of state repression, bore the brunt of public frustration, further reinforcing the localized nature of protest grievances. The contradictions in public sentiment—widespread anger at excessive enforcement, yet continued support for pandemic prevention as a policy—suggest that these protests were not directed at dismantling the existing political order but rather at rectifying its most disruptive excesses.

While the Blank Paper Protests did not lay the groundwork for a revolution, they do indicate important shifts in public expectations regarding governance and crisis management. The protests revealed the limits of public compliance when state policies become detached from lived reality and demonstrated that, under certain conditions, even a highly controlled political environment can witness rapid and unexpected mobilization. Moving forward, whether these grievances will resurface in new forms depends on how the Chinese state adapts its governance strategies and whether public dissatisfaction remains confined to specific policy failures or expands into broader critiques of the system itself.

By systematically analyzing the protests through multiple dimensions—public sentiment, protest dynamics, and state response—this thesis offers a more nuanced understanding of the movement's nature and limitations. Rather than positioning the Blank Paper Protests as a watershed moment for democratization, it situates them within the broader framework of adaptive authoritarianism, localized policy failures, and the evolving relationship between governance and public resistance in contemporary China.

# Appendix A: Protests

**Table A.1. Number of protests and percentage change on the 26th and 27th in each province**

| Province | 2022-11-26 | 2022-11-27 | Difference | Difference Pct |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anhui | 1 | 5 | 4 | 400% |
| Beijing | 53 | 23 | -30 | -56.60% |
| Chongqing | 3 | 1 | -2 | -66.67% |
| Fujian | 0 | 7 | 7 | N/A |
| Gansu | 3 | 0 | -3 | -100% |
| Guangdong | 7 | 14 | 7 | 100% |
| Guangxi | 1 | 0 | -1 | -100% |
| Hainan | 0 | 1 | 1 | N/A |
| Hebei | 1 | 0 | -1 | -100% |
| Heilongjiang | 2 | 0 | -2 | -100% |
| Henan | 0 | 1 | 1 | N/A |
| HongKong | 1 | 3 | 2 | 200% |
| Hubei | 6 | 9 | 3 | 50% |
| Hunan | 0 | 1 | 1 | N/A |
| Jiangsu | 9 | 6 | -3 | -33.33% |
| Jiangxi | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0% |
| Jianngsu | 1 | 0 | -1 | -100% |
| Jilin | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0.00% |
| Liaoning | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0% |
| Shaanxi | 8 | 7 | -1 | -12.50% |
| Shandong | 3 | 2 | -1 | -33.33% |
| Shanghai | 9 | 36 | 27 | 300% |
| Shanxi | 0 | 2 | 2 | N/A |
| Shenyang | 0 | 2 | 2 | N/A |
| Sichuan | 13 | 6 | -7 | -53.85% |
| Tianjin | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0% |
| Xinjiang | 8 | 0 | -8 | -100% |
| Yunnan | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0% |
| Zhejiang | 7 | 5 | -2 | -28.57% |

# Appendix B: Covid Impact on Daily Life

**Table B.1. Perceived Impact of COVID-19 on Daily Life - Comparison Between 2021& 2022**

| Response Category | 2021 (%) | 2022 (%) | Difference (2022 - 2021) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Severe Disruption | 7.55% | 12.91% | +5.36% |
| Moderate Disruption | 23.42% | 27.45% | +4.03% |
| Slight Impact | 36.17% | 30.23% | -5.94% |
| Minimal Impact | 17.82% | 13.97% | -3.85% |
| Barely Affected | 11.75% | 10.72% | -1.03% |
| No Impact at All | 3.30% | 4.72% | +1.42% |

**Table B.2. Perceived Impact of COVID-19 on Daily Life – Comparison Between Beijing and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Beijing (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Severe Disruption | 20.3% | 12.6% | +7.7% |
| Moderate Disruption | 32.1% | 27.2% | +4.9% |
| Slight Impact | 25.1% | 30.5% | -5.4% |
| Minimal Impact | 13.4% | 14.0% | -0.6% |
| Barely Affected | 6.95% | 10.9% | -3.95% |
| No Impact at All | 2.14% | 4.84% | -2.7% |

**Table B.3. Perceived Impact of COVID-19 on Daily Life – Comparison Between Shanghai and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Shanghai (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Severe Disruption | 26.2% | 12.5% | +13.7% |
| Moderate Disruption | 28.6% | 27.4% | +1.2% |
| Slight Impact | 31.0% | 30.2% | +0.8% |
| Minimal Impact | 7.14% | 14.2% | -7.06% |
| Barely Affected | 5.56% | 10.9% | -5.34% |
| No Impact at All | 1.59% | 4.82% | -3.23% |

**Table B.4. Perceived Impact of COVID-19 on Daily Life – Comparison Between Guangdong and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Guangdong (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Severe Disruption | 13.0% | 12.0% | -1.0% |
| Moderate Disruption | 27.4% | 28.2% | +0.8% |
| Slight Impact | 30.4% | 28.6% | -1.8% |
| Minimal Impact | 14.0% | 14.1% | +0.1% |
| Barely Affected | 10.5% | 12.6% | +2.1% |
| No Impact at All | 4.73% | 4.62% | -0.11% |

**Table B.5. Perceived Impact of COVID-19 on Daily Life – Comparison Between Hubei and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Hubei (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Severe Disruption | 13.0% | 10.2% | -2.8% |
| Moderate Disruption | 27.5% | 26.0% | -1.5% |
| Slight Impact | 30.3% | 29.1% | -1.2% |
| Minimal Impact | 13.8% | 19.7% | +5.9% |
| Barely Affected | 10.8% | 9.45% | -1.35% |
| No Impact at All | 4.70% | 5.51% | +0.81% |

# Appendix C: Covid Impact in Income

**Table C.1. Income Impact Comparison Between 2021 & 2022**

| Response Category | 2021 (%) | 2022 (%) | Difference (2022 - 2021) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lost All Income | 2.40% | 2.92% | +0.52% |
| Significant Decrease | 17.58% | 23.11% | +5.53% |
| Slight Decrease | 40.84% | 41.57% | +0.73% |
| No Change | 29.25% | 24.03% | -5.22% |
| Slight Increase | 7.05% | 5.03% | -2.02% |
| Significant Increase | 2.53% | 2.21% | -0.32% |
| Multiplied Income | 0.34% | 1.14% | +0.80% |

**Table C.2. Income Changes During COVID-19 – Comparison Between Beijing and Other Regions**

| Beijing | Income Loss | Stable Income | Income Increase | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Outside Beijing | 2,725 (67.65) | 952 (23.63) | 351 (8.71) | 4,028 (100.00) |
| In Beijing | 124 (66.31) | 61 (32.62) | 2 (1.07) | 187 (100.00) |
| Total | 2,849 (67.59) | 1,013 (24.03) | 353 (8.37) | 4,215 (100.00) |

**Table C.3. Income Changes During COVID-19 – Comparison Between Shanghai and Other Regions**

| Shanghai | Income Loss | Stable Income | Income Increase | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Outside Shanghai | 2,771 (67.77) | 969 (23.70) | 349 (8.54) | 4,089 (100.00) |
| In Shanghai | 78 (61.90) | 44 (34.92) | 4 (3.17) | 126 (100.00) |
| Total | 2,849 (67.59) | 1,013 (24.03) | 353 (8.37) | 4,215 (100.00) |

**Table C.4. Income Changes During COVID-19 – Comparison Between Guangdong and Other Regions**

| Guangdong | Income Loss | Stable Income | Income Increase | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Outside Guangdong | 2,511 (67.16) | 919 (24.58) | 309 (8.26) | 3,739 (100.00) |
| In Guangdong | 338 (71.01) | 94 (19.75) | 44 (9.24) | 476 (100.00) |
| Total | 2,849 (67.59) | 1,013 (24.03) | 353 (8.37) | 4,215 (100.00) |

**Table C.5. Income Changes During COVID-19 – Comparison Between Hubei and Other Regions**

| Hubei | Income Loss | Stable Income | Income Increase | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Outside Hubei | 2,767 (67.69) | 984 (24.07) | 337 (8.24) | 4,088 (100.00) |
| In Hubei | 82 (71.01) | 29 (22.83) | 16 (12.60) | 127 (100.00) |
| Total | 2,849 (67.59) | 1,013 (24.03) | 353 (8.37) | 4,215 (100.00) |

**Table C.6. Income Impact Comparison Between Beijing and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Beijing (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lost All Income | 1.07% | 3.00% | -1.93% |
| Significant Decrease | 18.7% | 23.3% | -4.6% |
| Slight Decrease | 46.5% | 41.3% | +5.2% |
| No Change | 32.6% | 23.6% | +9.0% |
| Slight Increase | 0.535% | 5.24% | -4.7% |
| Significant Increase | 0.00% | 2.31% | -2.31% |
| Multiplied Income | 0.535% | 1.17% | -0.64% |

**Table C.7. Income Impact Comparison Between Shanghai and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Shanghai (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lost All Income | 3.97% | 2.89% | +1.08% |
| Significant Decrease | 16.7% | 23.3% | -6.6% |
| Slight Decrease | 41.3% | 41.6% | -0.3% |
| No Change | 34.9% | 23.7% | +11.2% |
| Slight Increase | 1.59% | 5.14% | -3.55% |
| Significant Increase | 1.59% | 2.23% | -0.64% |
| Multiplied Income | 0.00% | 1.17% | -1.17% |

**Table C.8. Income Impact Comparison Between Guangdong and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Guangdong (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lost All Income | 2.86% | 3.36% | +0.50% |
| Significant Decrease | 22.8% | 25.8% | +3.00% |
| Slight Decrease | 41.5% | 41.8% | +0.30% |
| No Change | 5.14% | 4.20% | -0.94% |
| Slight Increase | 2.11% | 2.94% | +0.83% |
| Significant Increase | 2.11% | 2.94% | +0.83% |
| Multiplied Income | 1.02% | 2.10% | +1.08% |

**Table C.9. Income Impact Comparison Between Hubei and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Hubei (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lost All Income | 2.96% | 1.57% | -1.39% |
| Significant Decrease | 23.1% | 22.0% | -1.1% |
| Slight Decrease | 41.6% | 40.9% | -0.7% |
| No Change | 24.1% | 22.8% | -1.3% |
| Slight Increase | 4.94% | 7.87% | +2.93% |
| Significant Increase | 2.15% | 3.94% | +1.79% |
| Multiplied Income | 1.15% | 0.787% | -0.363% |

# Appendix D: Policy Satisfaction

**Table D.1. COVID-19 Policy Satisfaction – Comparison Between 2021 & 2022**

| Response Category | 2021 (%) | 2022 (%) | Difference (2022 - 2021) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very Dissatisfied | 2.77% | 4.60% | +1.83% |
| Dissatisfied | 4.49% | 4.46% | -0.03% |
| Neutral | 5.36% | 7.81% | +2.45% |
| Somewhat Satisfied | 10.96% | 11.72% | +0.76% |
| Satisfied | 31.10% | 30.37% | -0.73% |
| Very Satisfied | 45.33% | 41.04% | -4.29% |

**Table D.2. COVID-19 Policy Satisfaction – Comparison Between Beijing and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Beijing (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very Dissatisfied | 12.3% | 4.25% | +8.05% |
| Dissatisfied | 5.35% | 4.42% | +0.93% |
| Neutral | 13.9% | 7.52% | +6.38% |
| Somewhat Satisfied | 13.9% | 11.6% | +2.3% |
| Satisfied | 33.7% | 30.2% | +3.5% |
| Very Satisfied | 20.9% | 42.0% | -21.1% |

**Table D.3. COVID-19 Policy Satisfaction – Comparison Between Shanghai and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Shanghai (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very Dissatisfied | 12.7% | 4.35% | +8.35% |
| Dissatisfied | 11.1% | 4.26% | +6.84% |
| Neutral | 17.5% | 7.51% | +9.99% |
| Somewhat Satisfied | 8.73% | 11.8% | -3.07% |
| Satisfied | 25.4% | 30.5% | -5.1% |
| Very Satisfied | 24.6% | 41.6% | -17.0% |

**Table D.4. COVID-19 Policy Satisfaction – Comparison Between Guangdong and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Guangdong (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very Dissatisfied | 4.73% | 3.57% | -1.16% |
| Dissatisfied | 4.31% | 5.67% | +1.36% |
| Neutral | 7.97% | 6.51% | -1.46% |
| Somewhat Satisfied | 11.3% | 14.7% | +3.4% |
| Satisfied | 30.8% | 26.7% | -4.1% |
| Very Satisfied | 40.8% | 42.9% | +2.1% |

**Table D.5. COVID-19 Policy Satisfaction – Comparison Between Hubei and Other Regions**

| Response Category | Hubei (%) | Other Regions (%) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very Dissatisfied | 4.72% | 0.787% | -3.933% |
| Dissatisfied | 4.40% | 6.30% | +1.90% |
| Neutral | 7.95% | 3.15% | -4.80% |
| Somewhat Satisfied | 11.7% | 11.8% | +0.1% |
| Satisfied | 30.4% | 29.9% | -0.5% |
| Very Satisfied | 40.8% | 48.0% | +7.2% |

# Appendix E: Policy Preference

**Table E.1. Policy Preference – Comparison Between 2021 & 2022**

| Response Category | 2021 (%) | 2022 (%) | Difference (2022 - 2021) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Prioritize Personal Freedom & Economy | 53.99% | 32.88% | -21.11% |
| Prioritize Virus Prevention | 43.74% | 67.12% | +23.38% |
| Don't Know | 2.27% | 0.00% | -2.27% |

**Table E.2. Pandemic Policy Preference – Beijing vs. Other Regions**

| Group | Prioritize Personal Freedom & Economy (%) | Prioritize Virus Prevention (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Other Regions | 32.7% | 67.3% |
| Beijing | 37.4% | 62.6% |

**Table E.3. Pandemic Policy Preference – Shanghai vs. Other Regions**

| Group | Prioritize Personal Freedom & Economy (%) | Prioritize Virus Prevention (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Other Regions | 35.7% | 64.3% |
| Shanghai | 32.8% | 67.2% |

**Table E.4. Pandemic Policy Preference – Guangdong vs. Other Regions**

| Group | Prioritize Personal Freedom & Economy (%) | Prioritize Virus Prevention (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Other Regions | 32.7% | 67.3% |
| Guangdong | 34.0% | 66.0% |

**Table E.5. Pandemic Policy Preference – Hubei vs. Other Regions**

| Group | Prioritize Personal Freedom & Economy (%) | Prioritize Virus Prevention (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Other Regions | 33.1% | 66.9% |
| Hubei | 26.8% | 73.2% |

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