

## RESISTANCE VERSUS DISSIDENCE IN CHINA

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*Western observers run the risk of failing to notice things that are happening in Chinese society because they are looking for things that conform to Western expectations. By looking for “dissidence” they fail to see “resistance”. Police control of the streets ends public protest, but not the more deeply rooted forms of social resistance. A better understanding of the true causes of social unrest in China and the forms of resistance the Chinese people do adopt would improve Western attempts to analyse and interpret the reactions of the Chinese government and the reasons for its policies.*

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Western observers of social phenomena in China run the risk of committing strategic errors when they take an *a priori* and prescriptive approach by applying theoretical models developed on the basis of Western history as if they were universal. By searching for – and not finding – evidence that would correspond to the predictions of their modernisation theories, they tend to conclude that China is doing things wrong and needs to conform to Western expectations. As a result, they may fail to notice things already happening within Chinese society. By looking for “dissidence” – as understood by Westerners – they fail to see “resistance” – as seen by the Chinese themselves.

One example of this problem is the attention the Western press paid to a lone protester hanging a banner off a bridge in Beijing just before the Communist Party of China (CPC) celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> Congress. This corresponds to a Western ideal of the lone hero fighting the system. The problem with identifiable protesters in an autocratic system is that they can be detained and/or eliminated. Another example is the attention being paid to spontaneous protest demonstrations against China’s zero Covid policy. The problem with organised protests is that identifiable organisations can be dismantled. But there are other indigenous forms or social movements of resistance that analysts can fail to notice.

The alternative would be to take a descriptive and *a posteriori* approach, observing what is happening in fact – not in expectation -- and extrapolating more appropriate theoretical models and analyses as a result. Any failure to do this is a form of epistemic insouciance, **a lack of concern about whether beliefs are supported by facts**, or worse, a form of epistemic malevolence, an attempt to undermine knowledge, a strategy of misinformation. It is also a case of preaching to the converted, of telling people what they already believe and want to hear.

An example of the first approach is a [New York Times article](#) by an American professor stating that his university students in China did not speak openly about current affairs, that they had to disguise what they spoke about. The article puts the emphasis on the existence of repressive censorship in China. This is a given. China is an autocratic Leninist Party-State. Censorship is rampant there. Those are the rules of the game. The article ignores the fact that the students do **resort to disguised discourse in order to discuss current affairs**. Chinese netizens do find ways to evade censorship. They do discuss current affairs, despite the censorship. Another NY Times article dealing with the protests against the government's zero Covid lockdown policy is an example of the second approach. In this case a Chinese author offers examples of **the creative ways in which protest can be expressed in China**.

Blank sheets of paper are an example. The Western press has suggested that this might be based on a similar tactic in earlier protests in Hong Kong, but it has an even earlier precedent from the ex-Soviet Union, where a joke about dissidence refers to a lone protester with a blank sheet of paper who explains to the police that there is no need to write on it because everyone already knows what it would say. Some university students in China carried sheets of paper covered by "Friedmann equations" because the mathematician's name could be heard as "freed man" or "free man" in English.

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Repressive police control of the streets puts an end to public protest, but it does not put an end to the more deeply rooted forms of social resistance. What appears to be opposition to the Covid policy is the tip of the iceberg of a discontent with an entire productive system encouraged by the government, known as 996工作制 *gōngzuòzhì*, the "9-9-6 working hour system", working from 9 AM to 9 PM for 6 days a week. People who accept this system are called 韭菜 *jiǔcài* "garlic chives", **people whose workload fuels China's economic revolution, while others "harvest" the fruits of their labour**. This is also referred to as 内卷 *nèijuǎn* "involution", in reference to **a political-economic system that pushes itself to the limit rather than seeking to evolve**. This is much more worrying for the government because it is a threat to the economic model, and its failure could lead to opposition to the government itself. One characteristic form to oppose this model is known as 躺平 *tǎngpíng* "lying down flat", that is, doing nothing, refusing to be productive. **This has been referred to as a precursor of the phenomenon called "quiet quitting" in the US**, a response to the pandemic lockdown that has made people re-evaluate their life choices.

Another characteristic is known as 润学 *rùn xué* “runology”. The word 润 *rùn* means “profit” but its phonetic transcription is spelled the same way as the English verb “to run”, so it has become a code word for emigrating, for abandoning the system entirely in order to prosper in life. Since open opposition to the system will not work, there is a social movement that predicates 摆烂 *bǎi làn* “let it rot”, letting the system collapse from its own weight.

Chinese observers study the capacity of “**responsive authoritarianism**” to detect and to **ameliorate social unrest**. Their descriptive and *a posteriori* approach and the conclusions they draw are better equipped to deal with the reality of China today than the epistemic insouciance of Western prescriptive and *a priori* approaches.

A better understanding of the true causes of social unrest in China and of the forms of resistance the Chinese people do adopt would improve Western attempts to analyse and interpret the reactions of the Chinese government and the reasons for its policies. “Social stability” is the government priority because instability would deprive it of legitimacy.