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This article explores how paper became a tool of political dissent in Chinese people's protests against the government's authoritarian policies of "zero-COVID" and their collateral humanitarian crises. Paper took center stage in two incidents in 2022: the Chinese college students' "cardboard dog zeal" during campus lockdown and the national protest/vigil known as the "white paper movement" or "A4 revolution." In analyzing the two cases, I reveal how quotidian entities transform into puppets and performing objects that empower political expressions with their inherent materiality.

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Among countries in the world, China possibly has the longest relationship with the material we today call paper. The first historical account of paper and the papermaking process traces the origin of the material to the Eastern Han period (25-220 CE) in ancient China. Since then, methods of making paper have evolved, many industrialized to achieve mass production. Now, paper is so ubiquitous that we seldom register its significance. During China's recent era of "zero-COVID" policy, however, paper became an element hard to ignore in news-featured political incidents, its banality reimagined through creative usages in performative protests. This begs the question that Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy articulated in their investigation into the role of objecthood in performance: "how does an everyday entity take on a theatrical life and contribute to spectacular public events?" (Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014, 2).

Centering paper as the main ingredient of performing objects, I believe that paper's innate materiality renders it a versatile tool in Chinese people's expressions of dissent against the authoritarian policy of "zero-COVID" and its collateral humanitarian crises.

Drawing on theories of performing objects and puppetry to reveal paper's material potential for political engagement, I will look closely at two events: the Chinese college student's "cardboard dog" zeal and the public vigils and protests in China and abroad tagged as the "A4 revolution."

The Life and Death of a COVID Dog

From August 2021 to December 2022, China implemented a national policy called "dynamic zero-COVID" to deter the spread of COVID-19's highly transmissible Delta variant, a policy that required quick and precise containment and treatment of infected individuals to cut off the transmission chain. A widely criticized aspect of the zero-COVID policy was the "indoor disinfection" activities, where government personnel entered the houses of infected individuals who had been transferred to hospitals to spray disinfectants on every surface. Due to the lack of supervision and regulations, government personnel carelessly destroyed private property in this process. Over a dozen incidents have been reported where pets were killed in the name of total disinfection without the consent of the owners, an act the government justified as "harmless disposal." Another essential part of the policy was the extensive lockdown of communities (or even entire cities) of outbreaks and the normalization of ongoing partial lockdown of places with high population density. Strands of dissent fermented against the two strategies on a national scale and, in late 2022, converged in a single performing object: the cardboard dog.

During the zero-COVID era, colleges and universities where a large number of students shared dormitories on campus were major targets of the partial lockdown, resulting in students getting confined on campus or even inside their cramped dorm rooms for weeks or months on end with very limited chances of outdoor activities. To battle the boredom and psychological pressure of the long confinement, students devised creative ways of entertaining themselves in tiny spaces with limited materials on hand, including making paper dogs. These dogs were most often made with corrugated cardboard boxes used for packaging. Students cut, glued, and drew on the cardboard to make the

material into dogs and leashed them in the dorm corridor, many even adding finishing touches such as name tags, collars, dog food basins, and beware-of-dog signs to complete the illusion of the dog as a real, living pet. When students went out for food in the on-campus cafeteria or went for walks on the playground, they dragged the cardboard dogs along by their leashes as if they were walking them. Students were also passionate about "dog dating" where "dog" owners found mates for their dogs through in-person or online interactions with other owners. Some dorms even held "dog meetings" where all students showcased their creations. The activity became popular on a national scale when pictures and videos of students walking the dogs went viral on social media such as Kwai (Chinese TikTok).

Right before the cardboard dogs became national stars, a video was leaked in which a Border Collie was strangled in its home by the disinfection team on 27 October 2022. A while into the cardboard dog zeal, the activity was widely criticized as a sign of the students regressing to childish behaviors or even going "stir-crazy" (Zuo 2022), which went against the conventional social expectation for college students to be mature and emotionally stable adults. A type of online commentary rose to justify the activity and linked it to the dog-killing incidents: "Cardboard dogs are the best because they are safer. They do not have to wear masks. They will not be dragged out and beaten to death. You can always make another one even if you lose it." "Keeping cardboard dogs … is good for both humans and dogs because in our turbulent life during COVID, only this cheap substitute of a dog is our safest choice" (Chake 2022). The comments implied that the students, and the Chinese people in general, lacked the sense of security that they would be able to keep their pets and themselves safe under the oftentimes arbitrary zero-COVID policies, such as the mandatory lockdown and indoor disinfection. As a countermeasure to these comments that indirectly criticized government policies, some schools banned students from making or displaying cardboard dogs.

Before or after the connection was made between the paper and real dogs, creating cardboard dogs has always been an act of "infrapolitics," a term James Scott proposed to describe "the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups" (Scott 1990,

183) when open resistance is impossible. To understand the infrapolitics of the cardboard dogs, it is essential to return to the materiality of paper as the root of its performativity. It is by no means a coincidence that cardboard was picked as the material for the students' creative zeal. Home to an expanding middle class (to which a large proportion of young college students belong) and the e-commerce giant Alibaba, China was the largest and fastest-growing market for corrugate (Shaer 2022), the basic material for e-commerce packaging. Beyond the quarantine, the young generation of China grew up with e-commerce tapped into every part of their lives. The light brown boxes were so commonly seen and frequently delivered to their doors that it was highly likely that the students formed a sense of familiarity with the material. During zero-COVID when students were physically cut off from the off-campus world, e-commerce mail deliveries became their only means of shopping. In their temporary state of material scarcity, cardboard boxes became one of the few materials of excess, high availability, and, very likely, affective resonance as one of their few familiar forms of connection to the outside world. What seemed like a simple choice of convenience in the cardboard dog case was in fact scripted by the material's central role in the students' and the country's mode of economic engagement. The choice of material bore witness to how the students' living conditions and social interactions were unnecessarily restricted on a material and financial level during the endless cycles of campus lockdown.

The infrapolitics of the cardboard dogs was premised on what Steve Tillis calls the "double vision" of puppetry (Tillis 1992): seeing the puppet as an object but simultaneously believing it to be a living being. Interviews indicated that students felt their stress and loneliness relieved in the acts of creating (sometimes on their own but often collaboratively), naming, and then pretending to feed, walk, and take care of the cardboard dogs on a daily basis (Quasimodo 2022). In the prolonged quarantine, the dogs provided them with precious chances for group activities such as dog meetings or online dog matchmaking, as if they were taking real dogs to physical or virtual dog parks. They expressed the joy of meeting with a fellow dog owner during the walks and chatting about their puppies in conversations such as: "How old is your dog?" "Three

months." "Has he eaten yet?" "Yes." "Did you sign him up for education?" "He's taking Media Studies and History of Journalism. He'll do the grad school entrance exam for me next year" (Quasimodo 2022). When the students went out to classes without their dogs, they looked forward to coming back to their "pets" who would always wait at the dorm door to welcome them home (Zuo 2022). As a student named Yuyan said: "Cardboard dogs are our silent but loyal and steadfast companions. They are one of the few constants in our turbulent COVID lives" (Pand and Lv 2022). By putting their passion for creativity and longing for freedom and companionship into the boxes, the students animated the lifeless material, created "puppety" lives, and thus gained a much-needed sense of stability, companionship, belonging, agency, and hope that helped them shoulder the crushing weight of the depressing lives under lockdown. In continuing to create and animate the dogs despite the mainstream criticism and, later, the school bans, the students silently protested against the restrictions and uncertainties imposed on them by the authoritarian policy.

The cardboard boxes' material features deemed them the perfect candidate for the job. The e-commerce packaging was made to protect their contents, thus was more durable than, say, thin pages of printing paper. It was easily assembled, sealed, and moved around, thus lighter in weight and more mobile and pliable than materials such as metal or plastic. Physically speaking, the boxes' pliability and mobility meant that they could be reshaped in a variety of ways to satisfy the students' individual and collaborative creativity: the dogs were of distinctive sizes and "breeds" (reflected in both the shapes and the painting); while sometimes the boxes retained their original shape as the dog's body, they were also often cut and folded into irregular components of complicatedly built dogs that defied the original rectangular frame. Also, they could be easily taken out to communal events without breaking. The sturdiness of the material gave students a chance to socialize beyond the confinement of the dorm rooms.

Metaphysically speaking, boxes are containers—not just for e-commerce products but also for thoughts and emotions. When the lids are open, they open up a hollowness that caters to people's innate desire to fill up empty spaces and invites the creators to place

their emotional attachments inside. When the lids are closed, they take on a solid spatial weight, their durable walls protecting the tender emotions inside. Their physical volume carves out a space that is simultaneously empty and concrete, porous and sealed, and tender and solid, a beacon for diverse types of psychological projection and a promise of protection. Though no student commented on why they first chose the cardboard boxes rather than other forms of cardboard to make dogs, I would propose that part of the reason was an affective resonance with the sense of security and creativity rooted in the dimensionality of the boxes.

In regard to the pet-killing incidents, the "doggy" boxes referenced the real dogs killed for total disinfection on a mimetic level with their vivid "puppety" lives, their existence waging a silent accusation against the injustice of animal cruelty and the blatant disregard of the infected owners' private property rights. The fragility of paper references the vulnerability of the lives of pets (and humans) under the forced implementation of authoritarian policies, while the "indestructibility"—the replaceability and regenerability—of the cardboard is instilled with the people's resilience. These cardboard dogs are indeed "safer" in the time of political insecurity: they certainly could "die," but they could also easily "reincarnate" through the accessible material. Even when some schools tried to stamp down on the activity, a national community of cardboard dog lovers and creators had already taken root through social media. New "puppies" kept popping up where the ban could not reach, and reborn with every new dog were the haunting memories of the pets killed during zero-COVID and the students' discontent with the school lockdown. Foundational for the activity's national popularity, the accessibility of cardboard was an open invitation to collective creativity that fed the people's willingness and capacity to participate and empowered their spirits of resistance.

As Sicong Chen, an associate professor in education at Kyushu University, observed, the cardboard dog zeal spoke of the students' "competence to express feelings and ideas in creative ways that bypass censorship and resonate with fellow students. This collective resonance is what the authoritarian regime fears and wants to stamp out" (Lem 2022).

Facilitated by social media and cardboard's inherent material features, the collective resonance has reached beyond the walls of the universities to the entire nation. Among the torrents of criticism and under the authoritarian ban, the activity remained a vigorous, collective, and infrapolitical protest against the state policies through the reimagining of a quotidian material.

White Patches in Dissenting Crowds

In November 2022, a video widely circulated on the Internet of a blazing fire that killed ten and injured nine in a residential building in Ürümqi, Xinjiang. As Xinjiang had been under a city-wide lockdown for over three months due to the zero-COVID policy named "silence management" (meaning that residents of a district or an entire city were confined in their homes, leaving the usually buzzing streets empty and silent), many believed that the victims were unable to evacuate in time and that it took as long as three hours for the firefighters to extinguish the blaze because of lockdown setups that were hard to demolish in that dire moment, such as iron bolts on the building's door to prevent residents from sneaking out and roadblocks at the neighborhood's entrance. State media denied such criticism, but citizens were skeptical, which reflected the people's mounting frustration with and distrust of the state policy. Soon after, protests/vigils erupted in major Chinese cities and cities abroad with large Chinese communities, where people mourned those who died in the fire and demanded that the government end the national lockdown and other non-humanitarian zero-COVID measures and keep its authoritarian power in check.

Among the protesters, many held a piece of white A4 printing paper with nothing written on it—no catchy slogans, no revolutionary demands, nothing at all. The paper protest originated from a satirical Soviet-era joke popular on the Chinese Internet: a protester holding a blank piece of paper on the Red Square got arrested by the KGB. When he asked why it was a crime to hold a paper with nothing written on it, the prosecutor answered: "Do you think we don't know what you meant to write on it even if you didn't?" As China's state censorship has been growing more forceful for the past

few years and had started to crack down on comments about zero-COVID's guilty role in the Ürümqi fire, Chinese protesters took from the satirical story the message that when the nation banned the people from speaking of one common thing, everyone seeing the blank paper would immediately have a tacit understanding of what the message was. In the protests/vigils, the A4 paper's wordlessness spoke louder than any words could. These events were tagged as the "white paper movement" on Chinese social media and the "A4 revolution" on foreign ones (Che and Chien 2022).

The paper protest is a performance of negative space. As a two-dimensional spatial platform, paper allows people to carry and transmit information in the forms of symbols, pictures, and words. In art, negative space is the blankness of the paper that surrounds the main subject(s) of a painting. It is the original space of a piece of paper left outside the space that the information occupies and it often evades the viewers' attention unless they consciously trace the outline of the subject(s). Negative space is essential to any artistic composition, especially in traditional Chinese ink-wash painting where the art of leaving blanks on the rice paper is believed to be more important than the ability to draw shapes. For instance, clouds and streams, two major subjects of traditional Chinese landscape painting, are usually represented by blankness rather than any lines or shades. This keen attention to the nuances of blankness was certainly reflected in the white paper movement. In the protests, against a backdrop of dissenting crowds, the whiteness of the papers creates a negative space where the materialized silence stood out among torrents of noises and became the center of attention rather than an insignificant periphery. Meanwhile, on Chinese social media, pictures that contained nothing but a patch of whiteness with the same aspect ratio as the A4 paper became widely circulated. Whereas information of protests and defiance against the government's abuse of power were swiftly censored, posts of these pictures without any accompanying words went under the radar and became evidence of people's support for the A4 movement. Online and offline, the white paper confounds the boundary between the positive and negative spaces—between subject and medium, centrality and liminality. It thus disrupts the order of censorship, asserting the people's political subjectivity in a beguilingly passive material form.

The use of blank paper in political protests was by no means invented in the Chinese protests. For instance, anti-government demonstrators in Hong Kong used blank paper in 2020 after a national security law imposed from Beijing banned protesting slogans. In early 2022, Russian protesters against the war in Ukraine also held blank sheets of paper on the streets, an elusive act of opposition to avoid being arrested for political slogans (Dixon et al. 2022). The A4 revolution drew on the political momentum deposited in the material from previous protests, conveying a globally shared message that the voiceless cry of the people could be louder than the authoritarian voice of censorship and control.

At the same time, China's A4 revolution was distinguished from previous protests in the paper's specific size and culturally contextualized color. A4, 210 × 297 millimetres, is an international standard for paper size used in some parts of the world. It is the most common type of paper in Chinese people's daily lives. Whereas previous paper protests did not require standardized paper, the protesting paper in the A4 revolution created an easily referenced symbolism with the ubiquity and quotidianness of its standardized size. As anyone could easily grab a piece of A4 paper from their desks and march out to the protests, the national standardization of the material unified its users and strengthened the communal bond between the protesters. Moreover, the symbolism of the paper was localized by the association of its color in Chinese culture. Traditionally, white stands for death and mourning in Chinese rituals. Funerals are often referred to as "white events" because people wear white gowns and hair bands and throw white paper money into the air in funeral processions. Since the paper protests started as vigils for the victims of the Ürümqi fire, the white paper served not only as banners of rebellion but also bands of mourning. The overlapping cultural symbols contributed to the camaraderie not just among protesters but also between the protesters and the victims. As the saying goes, "An injury to one is an injury to all." In these assemblies of funeral white, the injustice against the dead fueled the dissent of the living.

Conclusion

Asserting the significance of the quotidian and fragile material, American poet Camille Dungy explains: “For something the wind could blow away, we ask paper to carry a heavy load. Marriage certificates record our unions; diaries keep our secrets; money makes the world go round. Paper holds our memories, our stories, our fears, and our desires” (Dungy 2022). I believe that the material is made significant not only by the words, pictures, and symbols it carries as a medium. Even wordless, paper speaks as loud with its materiality, just like in the cases of cardboard dogs and white paper protests. Its texture and build, its shape and color, its mimetic functions and cultural connotations, its birth and death, and its quotidian presence … all elements converged to make paper an active participant in the Chinese people’s dissent against the extensive COVID-19 lockdowns, the destruction of animal and human lives in the name of zero-COVID, and the authoritarian control of the government.

As theatre scholar Alan Read observes, it is not easy to theorize the performativity of the everyday and its world of quotidian objects, because their “utterances [are] so apparently inconsequential” and that the everyday “has its own logics and tactics but these are changeable entities, are qualitative in nature and demand to be reformulated in each case where theatre occurs” (Read 1995, 98). Yet by anchoring my analysis in the materiality of paper, along with the historicality and sociality that it entails, I theorized the material’s central role in scripting its own political usages and revealed the potential of performing objects.

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