Behind the Curtain: What Protests?

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After three years of draconian zero-COVID policies, the deadly fire in Urumqi sparked a stunning wave of protests across China—the most significant since the Tiananmen Square massacre more than 30 years ago. The world is watching closely as the full brutality and sophistication of China's police state is on display, but what are Chinese citizens seeing on the other side of the Great Firewall?

We have been following Chinese language traditional and social media in the People's Republic during the demonstrations and this is what we've found:

- What protests? China's censor brigade erasing any news of protests.

- Holes in the Great Firewall. Chinese are finding clever ways around the social media blackout.

- Patience is the virtue. China is counseling patience to an impatient population.

- Phone checks. The surveillance state flourishes with phones being seized to punish those out of line.

What Protests?

Official Chinese media has completely ignored the protests and have instead focused on coverage more favorable to Xi Jinping and China overall. Top headlines include:

NOV 30
"Shenzhou-15 launch mission was a complete success"*

DEC 1
"Xi Jinping holds talks with European Council President Charles Michel"**

DEC 3
"Jiang Zemin's great and glorious life"***

Source:
* Zhongbing, Qian. Xīnhuá quán méi +|shénzhōu shíwǔ hào fāshè rènwú yuánmǎn chénggōng [Xinhua All Media+ | Senzhou 15 launch mission a complete success]. Xinhua Net, 30 Nov 2022. http://www.news.cn/photo/2022-11/30/c_1129171939.htm
** Peng, Jiao. Xíjìnpíng tóng ōuzhōu lǐshì huì zhǔxí mǐ xiē ěr jǔ háng huìtán [Xi Jinping Holds Talks with European Council President Michel]. Xinhua Net, 01 Dec 2022. http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2022-12/01/c_1129176271.htm
*** Xinhua Net. Jiāngzémín wěidà guānghuī de yīshēng [Jiang Zemin's Great and Glorious Life]. Xinhua Net, 03 Dec 2022.http://www.news.cn/mrdx/2022-12/03/c_1310681395.htm
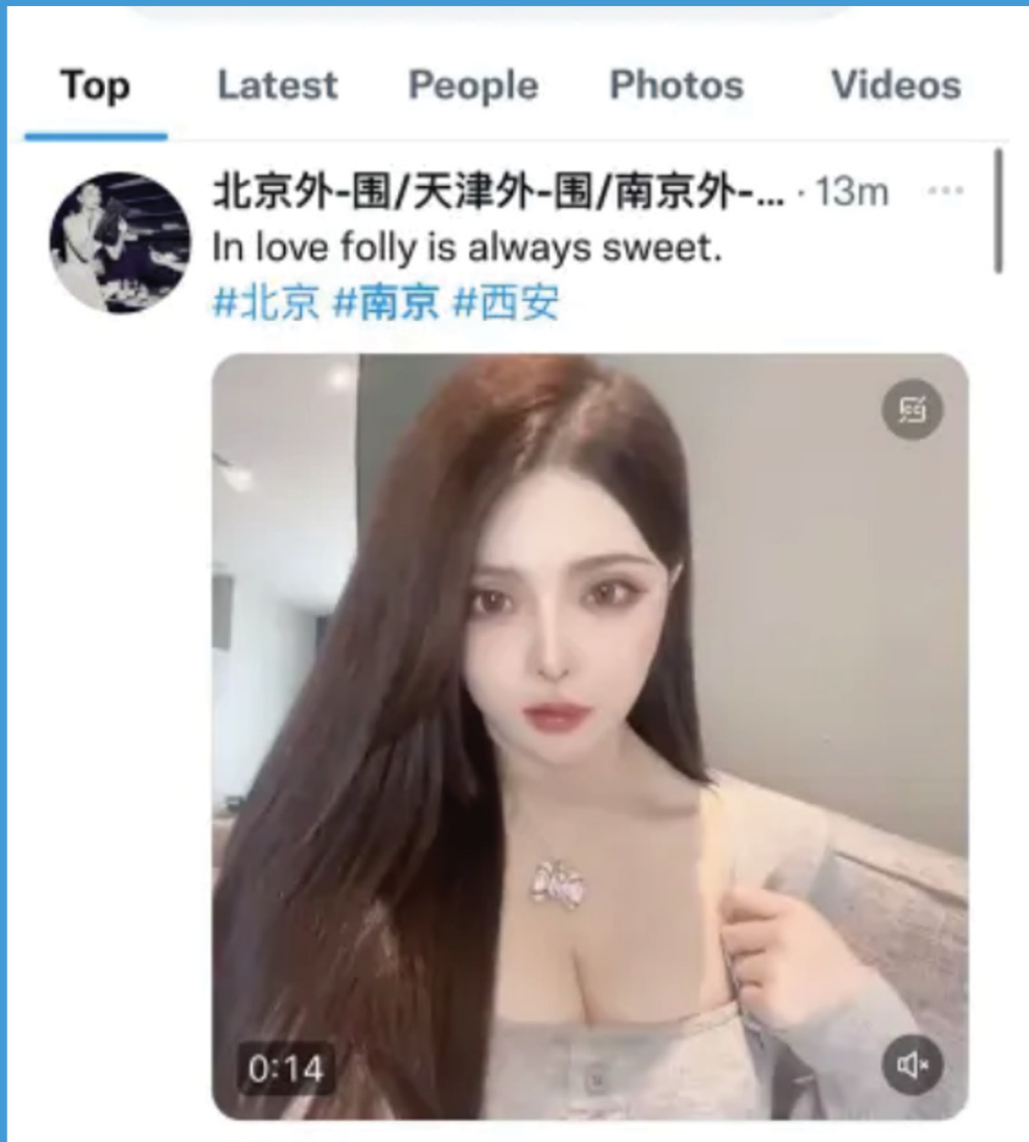
Censorship Regime Pushed to its Limits

China has the world's most sophisticated and intensively resourced censorship apparatus in the world. Here's how it's been faring:

- China's army of censors and automated algorithms have largely succeeded in scrubbing any signs of the protests from Chinese social media. Photos and videos on the popular WeChat and Weibo are quickly deleted.

- However, the sheer volume of footage and creative tactics to beat censorship algorithms has led to more Chinese people seeing the content before it can be taken down—sometimes for days.

- Chinese have circumvented the Great Firewall by downloading the free Western apps, which is considered a crime. Two days after protests broke out, Twitter surged from a spot below 100th to the eighth most popular free app in China while Telegram became the sixth most downloaded social networking app. [1]

- Chinese activists are also using dating apps in hopes that they will receive less scrutiny from authorities. [2]

- To further block protest content from Chinese citizens who had downloaded Twitter, Chinese bots were deployed to drown out relevant tweets with spam. Searching for major Chinese cities returned pornography, escort services, and gibberish as top results. [3]

Source: Top result in search for Nanjing. Post also includes hashtags for Beijing and Xian.

Chinese State: Be Patient with Zero-COVID

During the protests, headlines on the zero-COVID policy stressed patient cooperation with the government's ongoing efforts:

Headlines on the zero-COVID policy overall urge patient cooperation:

- Fighting COVID requires patience, care, and even more love" [4]

- "To fight against COVID, we must help vulnerable groups survive" [5]

- "Everyone is important in the fight against COVID, we cannot drop the ball" [6]

China also promotes stories on brave COVID workers and their public service:

- "Strengthening service guarantees on essential services" [7] – daily food, medicine, and health checkups for the sick and elderly.

- "Facing a cold front, COVID workers brave the winds" [8]

- Videos on Chinese social media have suggested "foreign forces" are behind any protests and the Urumqi fire. Chinese citizens have largely ridiculed this conspiracy theory.

High-tech Mass Surveillance to Crush Protests

China's vast domestic security apparatus combines a heavy police presence and existing government surveillance to track down protestors and intimidate the public. Police have:

- Patrolled the streets forcibly checking cell phones for any VPN networks or apps such as Twitter and Telegram that can circumvent the Great Firewall.

- Confiscated individual phones to collect its data before police questioning.

- Use AI-powered facial recognition software and millions of cameras to identify protestors caught on camera

- Use cell phone tower and phone tracker location data to interrogate those who were in the vicinity of a protest, many of whom were only passing by.

- Use COVID health codes scanned by people who took taxis near protest sites.

What's Next?: "Optimizing" COVID Rules

China has announced 10 new rules in a "Notice on further optimizing and implementing COVID prevention and control measures." [9] These guidelines ease some of the most controversial parts of the zero-COVID policy, but continues to ignore the widespread protests and their role in these changes. Chinese citizens were fed up and their widespread protests did end up making a significant difference in their daily lives. Chinese people who had access to protest coverage through VPNs are likely aware of this, but it would not be reflected in Chinese traditional or social media. For those

without VPNs, it's even more difficult to say how much information about the protests made its way around the Great Firewall meant to keep them in the dark.

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ENDNOTES

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