Dancing in shackles
The A4 Revolution Launched by Chinese International Students

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This paper explores the A4 Revolution, a civic movement initiated by Chinese international students in response to the tragic fire in Urumqi, China, and the delayed rescue due to strict COVID-19 policies. The movement, symbolised by blank A4 paper, reflects the creative resistance to censorship while highlighting the ongoing struggles against state control. Through a combination of online and offline activism, participants used platforms like Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook to organise events, share personal experiences, and navigate ideological differences. This study employs online ethnography and autoethnography to analyze how Chinese students across the globe engaged in the movement, examining the interaction between digital platforms and physical protests. It emphasises the complexities of identity, where participants' political, gender, and class backgrounds intersected, causing internal conflicts. By exploring these contradictions, the paper sheds light on the decentralised nature of the movement and the ways in which online spaces provide room for marginalised voices to resist authoritarian regimes. Ultimately, the A4 Revolution is a poignant reflection of Chinese democracy activism and the power of online platforms in shaping collective resistance across borders.

I f one had passed by Petriplatsen in Lund on the evening of 2 December 2022, they would have encountered a group of Chinese students, faces obscured by masks and caps, solemnly gathered for mourning. Encircled by flowers and candles, the setting was punctuated by posters dispersed across the ground, and most notably, sheets of blank A4 paper. The gathering was part of the global A4 Revolution, a grassroots movement organised by Chinese students worldwide in response to growing discontent within China.

On 24 November 2022, a fire erupted in the Jixiang Yuan district of Urumqi, China, resulting in ten fatalities and nine injuries. The public outcry that ensued quickly intensified, with many attributing the delayed rescue efforts to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rigid Zero-COVID policies (BBC News 2022). On 26 November A protest began at Nanjing Media University, where a blank sheet of A4 paper was raised as a symbol of dissent against the regime's excessive pandemic control measures and suppression of free speech. This act of defiance was the catalyst of a civic movement, that rapidly spread across 21 provinces and over 207 universities (Crossing 2022). Protesters took to the streets, holding up blank A4 sheets as a form of silent resistance.

The significance of the A4 Revolution extends beyond immediate political demands; it represents a powerful critique of state censorship, authoritarianism, and the tension between civil rights and state control in contemporary China. What makes this movement particularly noteworthy is its global resonance. Chinese students abroad rapidly mobilised, utilising digital platforms such as Instagram to connect with others in their cities and to organise public events, including candlelight vigils and poster displays. Digital creators with substantial followings played a pivotal role in the dissemination of information, the facilitation of event coordination, and the amplification of voices that might otherwise remain silenced within China's heavily censored media environment.

However, the diversity of political ideologies expressed through the movement's posters and slogans highlights the inherent tensions and contradictions within the campaign. These ideological differences sparked debates in both online and offline spaces, raising important questions about the role of digital platforms in shaping civic movements. This paper investigates these dynamics by examining the interaction between online and offline activism in the A4 Revolution, emphasizing the significance of digital platforms as spaces for civic engagement and resistance. The aim is to contribute to the broader understanding of how diasporic communities, particularly Chinese students, navigate complex transnational political landscapes through both virtual and physical activism.

Background

Theoretical Framework
Culture, as defined by Clifford Geertz (2008), is not a static set of principles governing behaviour, but a dynamic system of meaning constructed through symbols, which individuals and groups use to interpret and reflect upon their lives (p. 31). In the context of the A4 Revolution, the blank A4 paper emerged as a potent symbol of both resistance and mourning, ingeniously satirizing the Chinese government's censorship practices. By holding up a blank sheet, protesters conveyed the stifling limitations imposed on free speech, where even silence becomes a

powerful political statement. This cultural symbol thus functioned as a vehicle for critique, not only of the Chinese state's censorship but of the broader, repressive political environment in which dissent is silenced.

The blank A4 paper as a visual representation of repression is understood as a "symbolic act", as discussed by Abu-Lughod (2008), that critiques hierarchical structures of power. In this case, culture functions as a mechanism for "othering," whereby those who resist are marked and marginalised by the dominant order (p. 51). The A4 paper, however, disrupts this othering process by transforming absence (of text, of explicit demands) into presence, thereby rendering the unspoken suppression itself the subject of protest. This tactic underscores the complexities of resistance within a regime that seeks to eliminate political speech.

Analysing this movement through Geertz's interpretive lens allows to deeper understand the A4 Revolution as part of China's evolving democracy movement, a subject that remains underexplored in academic discourse. As Geertz (2008) reminds us, ethnography's primary object is not to provide solutions to universal problems, but to uncover how people within specific contexts make sense of their circumstances (p. 39). In this case, the A4 paper assumes a central role as a symbol through which we can interpret the broader dynamics of Chinese civic movements and the forms of agency expressed by participants, particularly in diasporic communities where the movement's symbolic power resonated across borders.

Literature Review

The internet has become a critical tool for activism, especially in heavily censored environments. As Bishop and Kant (2023) argue, digital platforms provide marginalised groups with spaces to communicate, organise, and resist censorship. Denning (1999) highlights the internet's transformation of traditional media from a "one-to-many" model to a "many-to-many" dynamic, enabling more participatory forms of activism. Soriano (2014) expands on this by noting that online platforms foster the creation of collective identities and political mobilization, particularly for groups facing repression. These insights helps to understand the role of digital spaces in the A4 Revolution, where Chinese activists both inside and outside China relied heavily on online platforms to coordinate their efforts and express dissent.

To date, only a limited number of scholarly works have specifically addressed the A4 Revolution. Thornton (2023) provides a comprehensive analysis of the protests, situating them within the broader political context of Xi Jinping's authoritarian rule, and emphasises the role of various social groups, including the Chinese diaspora, in the movement. Peng (2024) explores the intersection of feminist activism and civil disobedience, highlighting the significant role played by women in expanding the movement's scope from anti-COVID measures to broader demands for democratic reform. Chan (2023) examines the revolutionary potential of the A4 movement, arguing that the protests demonstrated the possibility of resistance even under China's increasingly totalitarian regime. Collectively, these studies provide foundational perspectives on the A4 Revolution, yet many aspects of the movement remain underexplored.

I will examine the interaction of online and offline strategies related to this civic movement, specifically asking two questions. One question is about "connection", how participants use social media in the context of the complex relationship between state power and civil rights. The other question concerns what internal contradictions emerged within the A4 Revolution, and how these tensions were negotiated among participants.

Method

Data Collection

This research employs a dual-method approach, combining participant observation with

autoethnography. As the primary research site I selected @citizensdailycn, a digital creator on Instagram with a following of over 73,000. The selection of this site was made due to its role as the largest resource aggregator for the movement. The "scroll back" method (Robards & Lincoln, 2017) was utilised to systematically track and analyse the digital traces of the campaign, encompassing 42 posts, 379 stories, comments, and 10 media reports. The data sources provided key insights into the movement's development and its digital strategies, with themes covering event recruitment, posters, photographs, anonymous communications, media coverage, and personal experiences. Conducting content analysis of this data allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how participants utilised social media to build a global activist network, thereby expanding the sociality of the movement.

Furthermore, I incorporated autoethnography, which allowed me to focus on individual participant experiences, with particular attention to their sense of agency (Chambers 2017). As a participant in the movement, I followed the Instagram account from its initial promotion of the A4 Revolution and joined a Telegram group in Skåne through the shared event posters. My role as an insider researcher enabled me to observe and partake in both online and offline activities, enhancing my engagement with the subject. Throughout this process, a reflexive and critical approach was adopted, recognising the author's own positionality and the ethical complexities involved in conducting research on sensitive political topics (Hine 2015, p. 85; O'Reilly 2012).

Data Analysis
Ethnography, as Geertz (2008, p. 31) asserts, is an interpretive science aimed at uncovering the meanings that individuals and groups assign to their experiences. The process of analysis, therefore, involves more than merely the collection of data: it also necessitates the careful interpretation and organisation of the data to reveal patterns and cultural significance. In this study, Geertz's concept of "thick description" (2008, p. 36) is of particular relevance, insofar as it demands that ethnographers contextualise and analyse data in a way that explains how participants construct meaning within their socio-cultural frameworks.

This research incorporates both online traces and my immersive autoethnographic experiences. This methodological combination was employed to examine how participants in the A4 Revolution used digital platforms to articulate their agency. Whilst Instagram was the dominant platform for the organization and the promotion of the movement, other apps like Telegram and Facebook also played significant roles in facilitating communication and coordination. The study draws upon the concept of "polymediated communication," which highlights how marginalised or vulnerable groups often utilise multiple communication channels to meet their diverse needs (Chambers 2017). By examining participants' use of various digital platforms, this analysis captures the nuances of how online spaces enabled both collective action and individual expression.

A key focus of the analysis is to elucidate the internal differences among participants, with a particular focus on the debates surrounding political demands and ideological positions. These debates, which occurred in both online and offline contexts, reveal the complexity of group dynamics within the movement. By addressing these internal contradictions, the study contributes with a multidimensional understanding of the A4 Revolution, challenging monolithic interpretations of culture and resistance (Abu-Lughod 2008, p. 58). The interactions between participants in both online and offline spaces created a unique cultural climate in which anonymity played a central role, allowing for both solidarity and ideological divergence.

Ethical Considerations and Data Privacy
Given the sensitivity of the A4 Revolution, ethical considerations such as privacy and security were paramount throughout the research process. I collected data from two perspectives, online and

offline (Boyd 2015), and to analyse users' use of social media in a specific context (Postill & Pink 2012). This "unobtrusive research method" minimises direct interference by the researcher in participants' activities (Hine 2015, p. 159). Autoethnography, as opposed to conventional interviews, allowed for deeper immersion in the movement without compromising the safety or anonymity of the participants. To prevent potential identification I removed identifiable information, such as specific dates, locations, and account details from the participants digital traces (Boyd 2015; Robards & Lincoln 2017; Hine 2015, p. 163). Sensitive information such as school names, personal names, and physical appearances were also excluded to prioritise privacy protection.

The public-private dichotomy of social media further complicates ethical considerations (Robards & Lincoln 2017). Digital platforms like Instagram and Facebook operate in both public and private spheres, allowing users to control the visibility of their posts. For this study, I collected only publicly visible data and avoided private content whenever possible. To ensure ethical compliance, I sought permission from @citizensdailycn to use their published content as research data and received approval. For Telegram, where anonymity is crucial, I refrained from collecting chat messages without authorization from all members in the chat group, focusing instead on my personal observations of how participants used the platform.

In terms of analysis, I avoided making "personalized diagnoses or moral judgments" (Hine 2015, p. 163). Although my own positionality involves opposition to the state control, capitalism, and patriarchy, I adhered to the principles of decentralization, respecting diverse viewpoints within the movement. All data involving ideological positions were categorised rather than ranked or judged. By employing autoethnography in conjunction with these ethical guidelines, I maintained an immersive and reflexive cultural experience, ensuring that my analysis remained balanced and avoided overly self-centred perspectives.

How we make connections under siege

On the afternoon of 25 November 2022, as I prepared to attend a public event in the town square, I encountered disturbing news on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform, about a fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang. Despite the initial reports, the video of the fire was expeditiously censored on Weibo, thus prompting me to turn to Twitter (now X) for more information. Amidst the festive atmosphere of a Christmas tree lighting ceremony, I watched a video showing the devastating fire and heard the haunting cries of women trapped inside the inferno. The stark contrast between the celebratory environment around me and the horrific scene on my phone induced a profound sense of disconnection and alienation.

Subsequent reports revealed that the victims, including women and children, had lost their lives due to delays in rescue efforts, which many attributed to the strict Zero-COVID policies. Although government officials were swift in attributing the tragedy to structural factors such as narrow gates and poor evacuation protocols (光明网 2022), these explanations did little to appease public anger. The incident was a seminal moment that incited widespread outrage against the Chinese government's policies and a focal point for the A4 Revolution.

In the aftermath of this event, I joined discussions on Twitter and soon discovered @citizensdailycn, an Instagram account dedicated to promoting China's democracy movement. This account became a critical hub for the organisation and the mobilisation of the A4 Revolution. Due to censorship within China, activists—both domestic and abroad—relied on VPNs and foreign social media platforms like Instagram and Telegram to coordinate their efforts while ensuring anonymity and security.

@citizensdailycn functioned as an anonymous submission platform that facilitated the movement's expansion. On November 25, the account made its first public call for candlelight vigils. Participants who wished to organise vigils in their cities created posters containing event details, including

information about time, location, and Telegram group QR codes. The posters were submitted privately to the account and subsequently published as Instagram Stories, allowing for rapid dissemination across global networks. Between October 2022 and January 2023, nearly 60 candlelight vigils were held across Europe, including in major Chinese student hubs in Sweden such as Lund, Gothenburg, and Stockholm.

The @citizensdailycn account functioned in a capacity that extended beyond the coordination of events, serving as a repository for protest materials. By 27 November, the account was using the hashtag #A4Revolution, featuring a then iconic image of a female student at Tsinghua University holding a blank sheet of A4 paper. Individuals worldwide designed posters that reflected diverse themes and styles. These materials were disseminated via @citizensdailycn, making them widely available for anyone to download, print, and display. Participants documented their efforts by taking photographs of the posters displayed in public spaces such as university campuses. The photographs were then reposted to the account, creating a powerful cycle of inspiration and replication. The slogans adopted by participants, such as "Free China" and "Stand With All People Resisting Dictatorship", further illustrate the movement's diverse motivations and demands. This subject will be examined in greater detail in the following section.

As the movement grew, the account evolved into a collective emotional space where individuals anonymously shared their personal experiences and struggles during the pandemic and under China's restrictive Covid-19 pandemic policies. Many contributors expressed their grief over the inability to return home due to the pandemic, their frustration with the high cost of travel, and their anger at the numerous tragedies caused by the policies. Others reflected on the privilege of being an international student and the solace that they found in connecting with like-minded individuals through offline activities. Whenever these sentiments touched on

specific policy grievances or criticism of the ruling party, they were virtually always censored or removed from domestic Chinese platforms, driving participants to seek the safety and anonymity of overseas digital spaces for expression.

The anonymous submission system ensured the safety of contributors, with all content –whether posters, event details, or personal stories – privately messaged to the account for publication. This allowed participants to voice their dissent without fear of retaliation while maintaining a decentralised and inclusive approach to activism.

Whilst Instagram served as the primary platform for promoting the A4 Revolution, the role of other social media platforms should not be overlooked. Telegram was crucial for maintaining anonymity of participants, for facilitating group chats, and managing offline events, while Facebook's Event function was utilised to streamline event organization and ensure accurate information dissemination.

Ideological Tensions and Decentralization in the A4 Revolution

As previously mentioned, the diversity of ideological slogans featured on the posters reflects the plurality of perspectives among participants in the A4 Revolution. Upon categorizing these slogans, several key themes emerged. The most prominent theme was opposition to President Xi Jinping, with slogans such as "Remove Xi Jinping". The second major theme targeted dissatisfaction with the CCP's policies and broader authoritarian governance, reflected in slogans like "No lockdowns, we want freedom" and "Stand with all those resisting dictatorship, oppression, and violence globally". Additionally, feminist slogans such as "Yes to Love, Yes to Queer" and "No to patriarchy, No to capitalist giants" highlighted the intersectionality within the movement. However, ideological differences soon sparked tensions, both online and offline.

Tensions typically surfaced during offline events where participants gathered physically.

Some participants anonymously reported concerns that certain protest slogans were inappropriate or divisive. For instance, at one event, an individual shouted derogatory remarks about President Xi's mother, which was perceived as misogynistic by others in attendance. Others expressed discomfort with the overtly political nature of the protests, arguing that the events should focus on mourning the victims of the Urumqi fire rather than broader political demands. Conversely, other participants called for the establishment of a unified set of slogans and political objectives to give the movement a more cohesive and powerful message. This proposal, however, was met with resistance from those advocating for decentralisation, who emphasised the importance of respecting diverse viewpoints and allowing individuals to express their own grievances and demands.

In response to these growing tensions, on 29 November, @citizensdailycn published a post explicitly stating that "avoiding division should be the baseline for all protesters." The post emphasised the importance of mutual understanding and active listening, urging participants to recognise each other's perspectives as rooted in personal experiences rather than ideological opposition. The emphasis placed on decentralization was evident in the organization of mourning events, such as the one held in Lund on 2 December, where the proceedings were not directed by a single organiser or moderator. Participants were encouraged to take the initiative, whether that involved speaking, creating posters, purchasing candles, or selecting music. This configuration enabled an organic and participatory form of activism, where individuals could engage on their own terms.

The ideological debates within the movement also highlight broader issues related to identity. As Hall and Gay (1996, p. 277) argue, identity is inherently fluid and complex, especially within the context of postmodern theory. Each individual within the movement embodied a constellation of intersecting identities, including Chinese, student, feminist, man/woman, member of the diaspora, and various political and class positions. These identities, which at times appeared contradictory, coexisted within the same person, resulting in internal tensions and differing motivations for participating in the A4 Revolution. Postmodern theory rejects the notion of a unified, coherent identity, suggesting instead that individuals navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, subjectivities. As cultures and contexts shift, individuals may temporarily align with different aspects of their identity (Hall and Gay, p. 598).

The A4 Revolution's decentralized nature aligns with contemporary understandings of networked activism, where movements are often leaderless and rely on digital platforms to facilitate participation. Such movements have the potential for rapid mobilization but may struggle to sustain momentum or translate grassroots energy into concrete political outcomes. In the case of the A4 Revolution, the utilisation of multiple social media platforms, namely Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook, enabled a flexible, polymediated form of activism (Chambers 2017).

The A4 Revolution illustrates the complexities of modern resistance movements, particularly those that emerge from within authoritarian contexts. While the diversity of political demands within the movement reflects the broad-based discontent with China's Zero-COVID policies and the CCP, the decentralised and diffuse nature of the movement raises questions about its ability to achieve lasting change. Nevertheless, the movement's strength is rooted in its ability to create spaces for collective expression, also in the presence of ideological differences, and to challenge hegemonic power structures in innovative ways. The A4 Revolution, like other decentralised movements, demonstrates that resistance can take many forms, and that even in the absence of a unified political program, the act of dissent itself can be a powerful force for social and political transformation.

Conclusion

The A4 Revolution exemplifies the creative strategies employed by participants to expand public participation, resist censorship, and maintain anonymity under an authoritarian regime. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, as exemplified by the account @citizensdailycn, has been instrumental in facilitating anonymous communication, event organisation, and the dissemination of personal experiences. Telegram and Facebook also played key roles in facilitating the logistical aspects of offline activities, enabling participants to form a decentralised yet coordinated campaign chain across multiple digital spaces. The interaction between online and offline strategies revealed the potential of digital activism to influence real-world outcomes, as tensions in offline events sparked online debates that subsequently shaped the organization of future activities. This decentralised structure fostered inclusivity and flexibility, enabling participants to navigate ideological differences while preserving overall cohesion. It is evident that through these platforms, participants circumvented China's Great Firewall and leveraged the anonymity of digital spaces to sustain a transnational movement.

While the A4 Revolution underscores the possibilities of digital activism, its limitations also highlight the complexities of transnational resistance. Applying Geertz's interpretive lens, the movement can be understood as a site of meaning-making where the concept of "Chineseness" is neither fixed nor monolithic but instead represents a dynamic and contested identity constructed through symbolic acts of resistance. The blank A4 paper itself became a multifaceted symbol, simultaneously representing silenced voices, state censorship, and the fluidity of collective identity in a diasporic context. As Soriano (2014) observes, digital platforms offer marginalised groups avenues to resist power structures and challenge authoritarian regimes, even when physical spaces for dissent are severely limited. The participants represented a wide range of backgrounds and political perspectives, including those from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and the broader Chinese diaspora. Each participant interpreted the movement's goals through the lens of their unique socio-political experiences. This interpretive diversity expanded the space for marginalised voices, thus allowing individuals who might otherwise remain unheard – such as feminists, queer activists, and ethnic minorities – to articulate their demands within a shared yet decentralised framework.

The A4 Revolution can be regarded as a form of resistance akin to "dancing with shackles"– a metaphor for the precarious balance between self-expression and suppression. The movement's decentralization served a dual function: it allowed diverse political positions to coexist without fracturing the movement, while also ensuring safety through anonymity. However, this very structure also resulted in the dispersal and depoliticization of the movement, thereby hindering the capacity to sustain long-term mobilisation or translate digital resistance into structural change. Nevertheless, the significance of the A4 Revolution does not lie in its sustainability as a prolonged struggle but rather in its ability to ignite transnational solidarity, using social media to create networks of resistance, amplify marginalised voices, and challenge state power beyond national borders. The movement thus constituted a moment of defiance, thereby disrupting the illusion of state omnipotence in China's authoritarian regime. In a tightly controlled society, the most significant consequence may be the fostering of a consciousness of dissent, thereby demonstrating that resistance, however transient, has the capacity to reconfigure the political imagination.

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ISSUE 11