

**Testimony by Tong Yi****February 28, 2023**

In late November of last year, students and others in several large Chinese cities gathered in the streets to protest. They were angry about a lethal fire in a high-rise apartment building in the city of Urumqi in Xinjiang--but that was only the symbol of deeper complaint, which was about the lockdowns that had been ordered by Xi Jinping's zero-Covid policy. Those lockdowns had trapped people in Urumqi to die inside a burning building but had also brought hardship to hundreds of millions of other Chinese. At a deeper level still, the young people were protesting a political system that could allow the whim of a single muddle-headed dictator to cause such mayhem. To complain at this level was dangerous, so, as a way of protecting themselves, the protesters held up blank pieces of paper. To the police and to their fellow citizens, they were saying, "You know what we mean, and we know that you know it."

The political system they were protesting had forced these people to put apps on their phones that enabled the government to monitor and control their movements. It forced ordinary workers to suspend their work and thereby jeopardize their livelihoods. For people so unfortunate as to contract Covid, it mandated removal from homes and into squalid quarantine centers.

The protests, which became known as the "white paper movement," resonated with many others in society because their key demands were simple: stop this ridiculous anti-Covid tyranny! Beyond that, the protesters echoed Peng Lifa, a courageous resident of Beijing who a month earlier had unfurled a banner that read:

No to covid testing, yes to livelihood;

No to lockdown, yes to freedom;

No to lies, yes to dignity;

No to [Mao's] Cultural Revolution, yes to reform;

No to Great Leaders, yes to voting.

Let us be citizens, not slaves.

Peng Lifa's reward for these words was to be "disappeared" minutes after his brave action.

Many of these "White Paper" protesters were female and more than half of the ones detained are women (I attach a list of detainees.) Their offense was that they caused the great leader Xi Jinping to lose face before the world, but CCP's legal system has booked them under "endangering social order" and "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."

It is important to understand that the protests of November 2022 were not new phenomena. They are but the latest appearance of a bubbling to the surface of discontent that has lain beneath the surface of Chinese Communist society ever since 1949. The Hundred Flowers Movement of 1956, Democracy Wall in 1978, the Tiananmen Movement of 1989, and the protests of Covid policy in 2022 all were spearheaded by idealistic young people who spoke for many others in society. The Chinese people have shown repeatedly that Communist rule has been problem for them.

A note on this word "people". The Communist Party repeatedly uses the word "people's" to label things that it, the Party, owns and runs. Thus we have the *People's Daily*, the People's Liberation Army, the National People's Congress, the Great Hall of the People, the people's currency, the people's courts, People's University, People's Central Broadcasting, People's Communes, and above all, the People's Republic of China. The repetition is necessary precisely

because the claim at bottom is a fraud. All of these things do not belong to the Chinese people but to the Communist Party. Only a lie needs to be hammered home in order to stick. The truth could stand on its own.

Three decades ago, in 1989, I myself was a student protester. I was a middle-level activist at Tiananmen and witnessed the killing of innocent people by the PLA near the square on that fateful night of June 3-4. Many others more experienced and articulate than I could be sitting before you today but cannot afford the risk. They have vulnerable relatives inside China; or savings accounts the regime could freeze; or pensions it could seize. Or they fear being blocked at the border if they try to enter China—or blocked the other way if they attempt to exit. Yes, the CCP manipulates controls that operate even within the halls of the U.S. Congress.

After the 1989 massacre I stayed active in pro-democracy work and in 1993 began assisting and interpreting for Wei Jingsheng, a leading dissident who had been released as part of the CCP's bid for the 2000 summer Olympic Games. Wei was urging the U.S. to condition trade on China's human rights performance. I interpreted for his meetings with then-Senator John Kerry, Congressman Chris Smith and Assistant Secretary of State John Shattuck. Our meeting with Mr. Shattuck alarmed the regime and we were arrested soon afterward.

In a detention center in Beijing, in the wee hours of many consecutive mornings, police interrogated me about what Wei Jingsheng had said to the US dignitaries. They were truly afraid that the US might listen to Wei. You can imagine my disappointment when I heard, on a loudspeaker inside my detention cell, that President Clinton had decided to delink the issues of human rights and trade. After nine months at the detention center I was handed a two-and-a-

half-year sentence for “disturbing social order” and sent to a labor camp for women near my home city of Wuhan.

Food at the camp was poor and working hours were long. Each of us inmates was given a daily production quota to fill. If you failed (and it was common to fail, because the quotas were unreasonably high), your sentence would be prolonged or, alternatively, your family could buy your deficit at the time of your release.

I had studied law in college and knew that it was technically illegal for the camp to be requiring more than eight hours a day of work. We were working twelve hours. I protested, and for that the camp authorities organized other inmates to beat me up. The beatings were terrible for two nights, then tapered off.

Eventually I was able, with the help of a fellow inmate, to smuggle a note about my condition out to my mother, who faxed it to a human rights organization in New York. Voice of America broadcast the story, other media picked it up, Mr. Shattuck asked after me on his next trip to Beijing, and with all that my treatment in the camp improved dramatically. The regime had been embarrassed. It scapegoated the policewoman who was on duty at the time I was beaten—as if it had been her judgment, and not a routine of the camp, to administer such beatings.

Three decades ago, the CCP could punish only the foolish few, like me, who stuck our necks out. Today, with frighteningly advanced surveillance equipment that recognizes faces, voices, DNA and even the irises of eyes, no one enjoys the safety of anonymity. I do not know the details of how the young protesters who were scooped up in the last three months have been treated in detention. But from my own experience I can say this with certainty: they will want us

who live on the outside, here in freedom, to shout about their injustice as loudly as we can. I hope the U.S. State Department will collect as many names as it can of detained protesters and let Beijing know that business as usual cannot go forward in the shadows of political prisoners.

In the U.S. we need to face the fact that we have helped to feed the baby dragon of the CCP until it has grown into what it now is. Since the 1990s, U.S. companies have enriched themselves by exploiting cheap labor in China and have, in the process, also enriched the CCP. The regime has acquired tools for its digital dictatorship from the U.S. through forced transfers, by theft, and sometimes, with the blessings of U.S. companies, by purchasing it. Wall Street, through its passive investment portfolios, sends billions of dollars from the retirement accounts of ordinary Americans to the discretionary use of the CCP.

It didn't have to be this way. After the June Fourth massacre in 1989, George H.W. Bush did not have to undermine Western sanctions on Beijing by secretly sending emissaries to assure Deng Xiaoping that nothing important had changed. In 1994 Bill Clinton did not have to sell out human rights to business interests by abruptly "de-linking" the two. In 2001 the U.S. did not have to give the CCP the undeserved, and later cynically abused, boon of W.T.O. membership.

We are seeing now the consequences of these policy choices. Under the leadership of the General Secretary of the CCP Xi Jinping, there is increasing oppression inside China, including genocide against the Uyghurs and destruction of freedom and the rule of law in Hong Kong; increasing aggressiveness outside of China, in the South China Sea, against Taiwan, and in support of Russia in its war against Ukraine; and an enormous U.S. trade deficit.

I am a proud immigrant citizen of the U.S., and I want my country to do better.