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Yiyang Wu  
*Hong Kong Polytechnic University*

Karthikeya Acharya  
*Aarhus University*

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# THE BLANK WHITE PAPER AS A DISOBEDIENT OBJECT

YIYING WU

THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY  
BOWYIYING.WU@POLYU.EDU.HK

KARTHIKEYA ACHARYA

AARHUS UNIVERSITY  
KSACHARYA@BTECH.AU.DK

## ABSTRACT

On November 24, 2022, the White Paper Protests were started by Chinese people to protest against China's strict zero-COVID policy and excessive censorship during the pandemic lockdown. In the protests, blank white papers were used as a means of protest. Framing the blank white paper as a 'disobedient object', our paper intends to capture a glimpse of the aesthetic composition of the protest movement. For this, we collected responses from 42 Chinese citizens about their views of the 'white paper'. Based on the data, we interpret the aesthetic composition of the protest movement in three parts, 'Blank Means:', 'Blank Fiction' and 'Making with Blank'. Treating the blank white paper as a design artefact, our concern is not just the object's visual characteristics as a form of expression but also the potential and capability of 'Blank' to facilitate transformation and change that we believe is what a design object should do.

## INTRODUCTION

After the outbreak of COVID in late 2019, China took up strict prevention and control policies to combat the Covid-19 virus through the 'dynamic zero-COVID policy' (Liu et al., 2022). The White Paper Protests (late November to early of December 2022) were one of the most prominent and bold resistance responses to this policy. It began as a response to a tragedy on November 24, 2022, when ten people were killed in a fire in a

residential area in Urumqi city, which was under lockdown for over three months. Since the mishap, people started to gather, mourn and protest, to express solidarity with the victims of the Urumqi fire and also show discontent with the restrictive policy. The use of the 'white paper' was first spotted in Nanjing on November 26, when a person stood at the steps of her university with two hands holding a blank sheet of A4 white paper. Soon after on November 27-28, hundreds of people gathered on the streets and held blank white papers as a means of protest in Chinese cities like Shanghai, Beijing and Wuhan. Although domestic protests did not find a chance to appear again afterwards, demonstrations with the white paper as the protest object spread rapidly worldwide in many foreign capital cities organised by Chinese students studying abroad. Consequently, such protests were called 'White Paper Protests'.

On December 7, 2022, for the first time since the zero-COVID policy, China announced a nationwide loosening of quarantine and testing rules. It was soon after the protests that Chinese authorities reversed the restrictions entirely.

## THE BLANK WHITE PAPER AS A DISOBEDIENT OBJECT

In Mandarin, 'white' and 'blank' share the same character '白(bái)', and 白纸运动 translates to the 'white paper movement'. Etymologically *blanc* (French), *blanca* (Old English) and *blanch* (Old High German) all refer to white or 'shining bright white'. So, for conceptual and presentational purposes in this paper, we use white and blank interchangeably. Echoing the conference theme of 'this page is intentionally left blank', our exploratory paper presents the blank white paper's transformation as a 'disobedient object' (Grindon and Flood, 2014) for Chinese protestors to express their voice. This positioning is from a design perspective than from other disciplinary perspectives, such as political science or sociology. From a design perspective, we mean it as a design artefact as described



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by Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon (2014) in their exhibition on Disobedient Objects. In this exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, they examined the powerful role of objects in movements for social change. Viewing social movements and protest sites from 1970 onwards as places of cultural growth, the exhibition curated a range of object-based tactics and strategies that social movements adopted to succeed. Disobedient objects are most commonly everyday, accessible and easily reused objects, appropriated and turned to a new purpose, to bring about social change with a multitude of struggles. For the curators' disobedient objects hold a mutiny of professional knowledge, skills and design, and within them manifest the power of change through political action. As the focus of the exhibition was the 'making' of disobedient objects used in social movements, it presents 'objects that open up histories of making from below'. A particular matter of interest from the exhibition's text for us was a note that there is nothing such as 'protest aesthetic', because for political movements it is always a matter of being emotionally moved, but each movement has its own aesthetic composition.

Using the above as an interpretive framing of the Disobedient Object, our intention with this exploratory paper is to capture a glimpse, a fleeting moment of history, a screenshot of the aesthetic composition of the blank white paper from the Chinese White Paper Protests. Treating the Blank White paper as a Disobedient Object, we present its aesthetic composition in three parts, '*Blank Means:*', '*Blank Fiction*' and '*Making with Blank*'. Treating the blank white paper as a design artefact, our concern is not just the object's visual and colour characteristics and its use as a form of expression but also its potential and capability to facilitate transformation and change, which we believe is what a design object should do.

## 42 RESPONDENTS

As the White Paper Protests started on November 26, 2022 in several cities of China, the first author (a Chinese citizen) conducted a survey with six questions on November 29. These six questions included asking potential respondents their 1) city of residence, 2) the number of PCR tests (a type of test for diagnosing COVID virus in China), 3) lockdown days, 4) their interpretation of the 'white paper' in this Chinese context, 5) new ideas to add to the white paper, and 6) to speculate a piece of fiction under the theme of white paper. The survey was originally created as an online form with a QR code through a China-based survey software. Only a couple of minutes after the publish button was clicked, the survey was deleted 'due to violations' by the platform. After this, the first author sent the questions to contacts separately from her

personal social media network. Thus, all data was collected through individual replies. In all, we sent questions to 133 persons and received 42 valid responses, 71 did not respond, 13 rejected, and seven said that they had not heard about White Paper Protests.

The 42 valid responses, coded as P01-P42, were all Chinese citizens. 31 lived in Mainland China, six in Hong Kong, and five in Europe. Among the 31 Mainland Chinese residents, 20 were from Shanghai, a city with an official city-wide lockdown from April 1 to June 1, 2022. All respondents were between 18-50 years old, and no respondent, from a health condition standpoint, was from a vulnerable group. All respondents were aware of White Paper Protests and provided their personal understanding of what the 'white paper' stood for, despite related news reports being banned in Mainland China.

## COMPOSITIONS FROM THE BLANK WHITE

Instances of the use of white paper for protests have been noted in the past, for instance, in Hong Kong and Russia, but this paper only locates the discussion in this specific Chinese context. Also, it only includes the voices collected from the respondents in this study, and thus, does not present other formulations expressed by White Paper Protests.

We start our analytical interpretation for an aesthetic composition by briefly presenting the respondents' everyday lives during the pandemic through two sets of data: 'the number of PCR tests' and 'lockdown days'. We divided 42 respondents into three groups, from Mainland China (N=31), Hong Kong (N=6) and Europe (N=5) due to different pandemic policies. The dynamic zero-COVID policy was implemented only in Mainland China. From the answers of each group, we averaged the numbers (Figure 1). The 31 Mainland respondents' average number of PCR tests was 104 times until their responses to this study. This high number was due to the compulsory testing policy that every resident had to take one test every 24, 48, or 72 hours according to the situation. If protocols are not followed, health authorities would intervene to ensure the test. Also, one's access to public space, including public transportation, hospital or restaurant, would then be severely deprived through a tightly controlled digital healthcare system. The second set of data is about days of quarantine or isolation when residents were not allowed to leave their home or residential building. The average lockdown days of Mainland respondents was 68 because of the city-wide lockdown policy. An account briefly presented shows how PCR tests became part of the routine: '*During the Shanghai lockdown last April, we had to do PCR tests every day on campus, then later became 2-3 times per week. Now, back home (in Fujian), whenever I see a PCR test kiosk on the street, I*

*feel like just doing it to continue my life.*’ (P26 from Fujian).

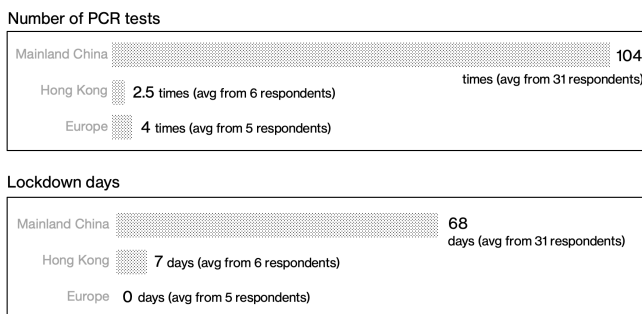


Figure 1: The 42 respondents’ number of PCR tests and lockdown days during the pandemic

The White Paper Protests expressed two interrelated appeals according to our respondents. One was people’s discontent and anger against the pandemic policy and/or the enforcement measures adopted by various local governments and authorities. These have caused limitations of rights to mobility and other healthcare resources, inconvenience, economic loss and other secondary accidents in daily living. And the second appeal was the accusation of increasing censorship of a sensitive topic of the pandemic policy (Chang et al., 2022). Just as the Politburo Standing Committee, consisting of the top leadership of China, stated that ‘resolutely fight against all words and deeds that distort, doubt, and deny China’s zero-Covid policies’, different opinions, frustrated feelings, neutral scientific references, and sharing of factual daily events were forbidden on Chinese internet if they did not appear supportive (Ruan et al., 2020).

Next, we present how the ‘blank white paper’ became the means of protest and a disobedient object from the people in a censored society. Building on this framing, we disperse the blank whiteness into multiple components.

**BLANK MEANS: A SOCIETY OF CENSORSHIP: ‘THE ERASED, WIPED AND DENIED’**

The first meaning of blank was a sign of the excessively censored society where people were not allowed to openly express or share things that were inconsistent with or disfavour the government’s zero-COVID policy or actual enforcement. Related content published online would be censored and deleted immediately, and some accounts banned temporarily or permanently. On the internet, people have experienced too many times when they clicked a link to an article or a video, they encountered a blank page showing words such as ‘404’ (the code for ‘Not Found’), ‘403’ (the code for ‘Forbidden’), ‘does not exist’ or ‘this content cannot be viewed due to violations’. Thus, the blank paper represented *‘the sad fact that no matter what I say, it would be erased’* (P14 from Shanghai), including *‘the*

*unspoken things, the unseen things, everything that has disappeared’* (P06 from Shanghai). It presented the overwhelming, blind and slavish censorship, and government’s deliberate blindness to people’s needs and voices.

**BLANK MEANS: THE POWER OF THE SILENCED: ‘SILENCE SPEAKS LOUDER THAN ANY SOUND!’**

In a society where different opinions were silenced, what could people say to express disobedience? Displaying silence became a protest weapon of silent people. People concretised the silence into the material form of a sheet of blank paper. People performed the silence by holding it high with their hands in public places. By doing this, the message was clear: *‘We cannot say, but we still want to say.’* (P25 from Fujian). This scene strongly delivered the contrast between the vulnerability of people deprived of the right to expression and their courage and boldness of expression. In the protest, they no longer kept silent about their silence or spoke behind the back of the dominant. They chose to speak up with silence from the front, directly and openly. Unlike other expressions they used to do before, people no longer produced content and then watched helplessly its disappearance. Instead, they directly jumped with a blank. Their expression could not be deleted because it was already blanked. This time, people took control and left the dominant powerless. When silence was the only thing left, they made the silence loud and the blank full.

Therefore, several respondents commented that *‘the silence is louder than any sound’* (P09 from Shanghai, P38 from Europe). As P34 from Europe described: *‘I tried to add some words to the blank paper, but realised no word is more powerful than the blank. Blank is our ultimate protest slogan’*. Among 42 respondents, 33 considered it unnecessary to add anything extra to the blank paper, as *‘the blank is strong, powerful and concise enough to convey their voices’*. It also shows another meaning that blank was a shared and united gesture and belief by whoever held the same stance, as P25 from Fujian put it: *‘Although you don’t say, I don’t say, nobody says, we all know what we want to say!’*. Moreover, the silence added a flavour of irony and mockery to the protest, which used *‘the absurd to reveal the absurd, to fight against the absurd!’* (P28 from Jiangsu).

**BLANK MEANS: A NEW START: ‘REPRESENTING POSSIBILITIES’**

Walking to streets from the censored internet and holding white paper high was a rare scene in China. It showed the courage and boldness of people. With this light of hope, blank, from another perspective, was seen as a new start, *‘inducing everyone to paint, write, fill, stain, and so on.’* (P08 from Shanghai)

Below, we present a piece of writing from P31 from Hong Kong on Whiteness. In it, he also quotes from the Korean commenter Quan Xizhe and the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky. He told us that white blankness was at the intersection of loss and gain and allowed things to be born.

*'White is not a kind of juxtaposition with other colours. White is actually the background colour that makes other colours appear' (Quan, 2018). White is nothing, but it allows a certain substance to be born.*

*'White is not death. (...) That is the young 'nothing', more precisely, it is the nothing before the beginning, the nothing before birth.'* (Kandinsky, 2012)

*White opens, again and again to time, and regains through loss. In the sharpest white, life and death are allowed and promised at the same time. Quan Xizhe (2018) said: "There, you will see the possibility of existence that seems to have been lost. It has not disappeared and remains there. I will meet you there, and I will meet others who are coming there, in that substratum, which is hostile and cold, soft and dissipating, and at the same time breathtakingly beautiful.'*

*The poetry of the blank is also the politics of the blank. Because when we are in the land of nothingness, there is the existence of the universe.'*

#### BLANK FICTIONS

Through the data gathering process, 12 participants created 14 pieces of fictional stories under the theme of white paper. None described a less censored society or proposed a solution or an ameliorative approach. All were written like Aesop's Fables to mock, criticise or exaggerate the censored society. For instance, eight pieces portrayed a fictional world where more strict control policies on the use of white paper are imposed, such as manufacturing and use of white paper being banned, or only purchased through real-name registration, and white shirts being banned. Below, we present two fictional worlds that mock blank reality, the first flavoured with mythical amusement.

*Fiction 1: 'In the White Paper Kingdom, all people are white papers. When they are born, they carry various characters on their' bodies'. As they grow up, the traces of characters will gradually fade. When they are almost 7 years old, there is a health department that specifically checks the disappearance level of characters. People with characters less than 30% of the body area are normal, and people with more than 70% will be taken to a centralised scar removal room for isolation. The whitest person will be selected as the most popular person, granted the best social welfare and white house.*

*When people start to communicate and generate personal thoughts, these thoughts will remain with their bodies, if they are not forgotten in time. Therefore, there are many bleaching beauty salons all over the country, providing regular bleaching services. Or people can also take supplement products to erase their thoughts. In all, everyone consumes actively to make themselves whiter. Because people can't remember yesterday's thoughts or pain, everyone in the White Paper Kingdom is very happy.'* (P06 from Shanghai)

*Fiction 2: 'The white paper of happiness has been invented. No matter what people write on it, the paper can only show words about happy lives and emotions. And the noise will automatically disappear without leaving a trace.'* (P33 from Hong Kong)

#### MAKING WITH BLANK

The data also generated ten new ideas from nine respondents about what could be added to the blank paper. Many things were suggested, such as seeds and a person-shaped Chinese character of 'person' (人, rén). Here, we illustrate one concept:

*'I hope the blank paper is covered with needle holes that must be zoomed in to see.'* (P06 from Shanghai).

This simple concept we interpret as the relationship in a society between the top-down governance and the expressive agency of individuals from the bottom-up. The whole piece of white paper is a metaphor for the formal image in the government's eyes. It appears harmonious, pure and smooth, with no extra noise or stains on the surface. However, when one gets closer, the previously invisible or hidden needle holes appear visible as the representation of individual voices and feelings. The needle is the insignificant yet stubborn and strong citizenry. The holes are the traces resulting from the disobedience of individual citizens. Albeit almost unseen, these holes have made the piece of white paper to be seen through, agitated and rough. Comparatively, the softness of the paper material indicates the fragility of the dominant system that is meant to control.

Lastly, we leave you by making one-page blank. With this, we display with solidarity, all erased content, denied truths, lost lives, silent cries from the protests, and all other unspoken words that can bring change.





## CONCLUSION

You have now scrolled and travelled across the blank white paper as an aesthetic composition, a tiny sliver from a social movement, a Disobedient Object from the White Paper Protests. As final note we also hope you see this:

*'I'll see you in the silence of the birch grove. I'll see you in the silent window of the winter sun rising. I'll see you where the light hits the sloping ceiling where the dust shakes and shines. In that white, among all the whites, you'll take a deep breath.'* (Han Kang <All the Whites> quoted by P31 from Hong Kong)

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