

Ghost in Dissent: Artifacts and the Architecture of Activism in Digital China

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This study examines the versatile tactics of digital activism in China via two pivotal activist interventions in 2022: the Xiaohuamei T-shirt and the global Ürümqi road sign projects. It explores how activists navigate an increasingly restrictive digital environment by hybridizing online and onsite tactics and revitalizing the role of materiality. The archival analysis reveals that these movement artifacts, such as T-shirts and road signs, are anonymously produced and distributed through clandestine networks, which are not just tangible records of protest dissent but also vital components of a broader socioarchival ecosystem. The findings suggest that such artifact-centric activism promotes the emergence of more dispersed and inclusive resistance networks that cut across gender and class lines. These networks and their practices offer a fresh template for mobilization that blends seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life, allowing for the preservation of activist endurance and movement afterlives in repressive regimes.

Keywords: digital activism, materiality, decentralization, anonymity, feminism, China

In a corner of a lesbian bar in a bustling city in central China, a T-shirt rag souvenir hangs unassumingly on a makeshift board. The detectable Chinese phrase reads: "That which is not forgotten will eventually find its response (念念不忘,必有回响)," a famous Buddhist teaching reimagined by feminists in China. The simple hanging artifact silently commemorates the Xuzhou chained woman incident in 2022—a catalyst for impassioned debates that drew millions and galvanized activists into a symphony of bodily protest. In the wake of pervasive state censorship, online dialogues surrounding this pivotal feminist movement have all but dissipated. Thus, this humble emblem, accompanied by a constellation of similar movement "relics" in the bar's corner, becomes a vestige of the interconnected memories of various feminist

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Date submitted: 2024-04-22

¹ The authors would like to thank Guobin Yang, Arseli Dokumaci, Kimberly Fernandes, Mohammed Rashid, Christopher Connery, and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback on earlier versions of this study. The authors would also like to thank all the anonymous participants in the activism mentioned in this study.

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and queer struggles. The story of this memento hints at the unique positionality of artifacts and their associated materiality in Chinese social movements.

This study endeavors to invigorate a much-needed conversation, shifting the focus from the celebrated digital modalities of organizing to spotlight the indispensable, tangible threads of connectivity and materiality that underpin China's digital activism. From the lens of two activist interventions in 2022, it shows that multifaceted materiality through the making and distribution of movement artifacts not only sustains the daily resistance of the activists but also breeds a new resistance landscape that is more gender- and class-inclusive.

Studies of digital activism typically analyze online actions from the perspective of hashtag activism on centralized digital platforms. In the context of China, research on digital activism predominately focuses on how netizens negotiate with and outwit an increasingly sophisticated censorship regime. Regardless of the distinct social contexts and technopolitical dynamics, there is a shared sentiment in these studies: The digital realm offers a more direct, individualistic avenue for expression and participation, characterized by reduced participatory costs for previously marginalized groups. The global surge of online protests during the COVID-19 pandemic, with their unique mobilization dynamics (Piatti-Crocker, 2021), appears to reinforce this notion.

However, a paralleling strand of literature from the Global South indicates that activism doesn't always gravitate toward digital visibility, especially in response to state repression and civil society hostility; it often manifests in more tangible, bodily, and anonymous forms to evade targeted surveillance and violence (Jack & Avle, 2021; Kraidy, 2016; Ozduzen, 2021; Rashid, 2022; Suglo, 2024). We situate our study within this broader shift of the form of digital contention, analyzing why and how activists cope with the tightening digital surveillance regime by adopting onsite anonymity and decentralization. Meanwhile, this study joins efforts with the burgeoning scholarship on the mutuality between space, materiality, and digital activism (Costanza-Chock, 2014; Poster, 2021). Digital activism is not only imbricated in a transmedia infrastructure but continues to give birth to new notions of space and locality. Our analysis furthers this reasoning by revealing the promising but often inconspicuous production of nonstreet spaces of contention as a more feminist and care-based daily resistance landscape.

Accordingly, this article seeks to enrich these two lines of scholarship by examining the mobilization of two high-risk activist actions, the Xiaohuamei T-shirts and the global Ürümqi road sign protests, both orchestrated in 2022 under stringent COVID-19 controls. These actions are linked to the Xuzhou chained woman's incident and the White Paper Movement, two of the most high-profile social events during the pandemic. While directly addressing gender-based violence and anti-lockdown injustices, respectively, these events have also sparked broader discussions and activism around issues such as the urban-rural divide, ethnic oppression, disability justice, freedom of speech, and more, making them inherently multidimensional. As labor researchers and activists deeply engaged with Chinese activist networks over the past decade, we have collectively chronicled a multitude of social protests as part of our archival practices. Drawing on our archives and anonymous sources, we were able to capture many behind-the-scenes details of these mobilizations. By revealing the intricate and intimate ways in which activists interact with the

materials they use, this study challenges prevailing perceptions of cyber activism in China and documents new methodologies of activist endurance in an increasingly authoritarian milieu.

Specifically, we argue that within China's heightened surveillance landscape since 2020, avenues for social mobilization often manifest in particular face-to-face interactions and semianonymous logistical exchanges, and it is precisely these unnoticed formations of materiality that contribute to the resilience of activist communities.

Although offline activism presents its own set of risks, the methods of specific nonstreet protest actions are more readily managed by activists, making potential threats more foreseeable. Consequently, various artifacts produced around social events, such as flyers, calendars, T-shirts, stickers, and more, and the random and anonymous dissemination of these artifacts, are the foundation for many digital actions. Moreover, even as the state expeditiously wipes out digital traces, these concrete artifacts endure as lasting memories and mourning sites of resistance in various private and semipublic spaces, thereby serving as persistent reminders to everyday participants of their prior engagements. We refer to this hybrid form of social mobilization that is easily obscured under digital totalitarianism as postdigital action—it is still hinged on online networks, including burgeoning transnational and diasporic connections, but its materiality and locality are indispensable scaffolding. This approach goes beyond the dual use of digital and physical realms; it encapsulates a unique, temporal blending that magnifies the scope and afterlives of mobilization.

In the end, this study also reflects on the potential bottlenecks of this more decentralized, leaderless, and phantom-like mobilization mode, particularly in the predominantly male-led Sinophone activist landscape. Notably, such modes are not easily visible and are even more challenging to document. Owing to longtime political and economic vulnerability, deeply involved participants, many womxn and queer, often purposely choose to stay anonymous, low key, and disconnected from peers, feeding into a feedback loop to amplify the visibility and influence of those who may be less involved but possess a more significant share of resources.

From a broader perspective, emphasizing the materiality and hybridization of digital actions embodies a feminist methodology and praxis, a way to see and reevaluate the coordination, repair work, setbacks, repercussions, and various daily efforts in social movements.

State Repression and Shifting Forms of Digital Activism

Our study aims to add to the emerging scholarship on social movements' nondigital mobilization tactics in a digital age. The past few years have witnessed the dramatic rise of digital carceral and surveillance technologies around the globe, resulting in a marked contraction of cyber utopianism and technological determinism that dominated the previous decade of social justice movements and revolutions (Bevins, 2023; Tufekci, 2017). Accordingly, scholarship has increasingly shed light on the continuous importance of nondigital and hybrid forms of activism, from graffiti to sharable zines, from community centers to mutual aid stations. Even during the Arab Spring, a period often characterized by high hopes in digital activism, activists across MENA regions physically put themselves on the line using their street presence as a potent tool for radical changes (Kraidy, 2016).

In regions where the political climate has become more oppressive, there has been a notable revival in onsite protest tactics and the creation of tangible spaces for activism and mutual aid, serving as the last bastions of resistance. For instance, in Cambodia, activists established new urban collectives in response to the shrinking areas for online expression and the increased risk of detention since 2017 (Jack & Avle, 2021). In another example, in the aftermath of Turkey's Gezi Park protests, with the imposition of strict regulations on public gatherings and heightened online censorship, image activists have turned to courtroom sketches as an alternative means of challenging the prevailing official narratives (Ozduzen, 2021). Similarly, in both the Umbrella Movement and Anti-Extradition Bill Protests in Hong Kong, there had been an explosion of onsite artistic expressions—comics, graffiti, installation, and performance art—that serve as powerful instruments against censorship and violence (Suglo, 2024; Valjakka, 2020). Moreover, even in advanced capitalist nations, high-stakes protests increasingly adopt tangible and corporeal modes of activism, especially in the face of intensifying state brutality, as seen in the Stop Cop City and Palestine solidarity movements (CrimethInc, 2023).

Despite the tech-savvy nature of movement participants, movements in repressive environments incorporate more onsite and anonymous forms as a tactic to sustain safe and trustworthy spaces for activism, resonating with trends observed in China since 2020.

The resurgence in onsite resistance this article investigates, to a large extent, results from the response to the ubiquitous digital surveillance, leading to the precipitous increase of political risks associated with online expression. In the post-2020 environment, the state used pandemic control as an excuse and cover for heightened digital surveillance. Seemingly innocuous online remarks can have severe repercussions for the average Internet user. A culture of mutual surveillance, coupled with the implementation of counterespionage laws (Woo, 2023), has exacerbated this chilling climate. At the same time, Chinese law enforcement has increasingly begun to differentiate between diverse categories of activists, with one significant criterion being whether encrypted communication software such as *Signal* and *Telegram* and virtual private networks are installed on their phones. As a result, many activists have felt compelled to uninstall these secure communication tools and stay silent on open, surveilled social media. Another parallel trend is the police's pervasive relational repression that often uses participants' online social networks to track down potential activists. Thus, proactive deleting and obfuscating digital traces and cutting off established online relationships have become a hidden norm even for diaspora groups who fear international repression, which fragments the activist community and unintendedly paves the way for more ghostly participation.

Therefore, examining these intricate formations of activism patterns in China contributes to the broader debate on the often contradictory role of state repression in shifting the modes of digital contention.

Materiality and Locality as Feminist Practices of Digital Activism

Our intervention aims to contribute to and deepen the burgeoning scholarship on the enduring importance of materiality and locality in digitally mediated activism.

Research on transmedia organizing has constantly indicated the coproduction of physical spaces and virtual mobilization (Costanza-Chock, 2014; Parth, Bathini, & Kandathil, 2023). By analyzing three virtual protests in India that span more than a century, Poster (2021) has convincingly showcased the dynamic creation

and reappropriation of place within social movements. Even amid the strictest pandemic lockdown that forced activists to primarily rely on digital tools, low-tech labor such as food preparation, grocery distribution, and package deliveries remained vital to community organizing (Ferrari, 2022). By emphasizing the logistics infrastructure to consumers, online platform workers strategically make their daily labor more visible during the pandemic shelter-in-place (Kneese, 2022). In China, the success of online movements, with the #MeToo movement being a prominent example, depends on the dynamic interaction between local advocacy networks and state institutions (Liao & Luqiu, 2022). Similarly, Yang (2022) has shed light on the interplay between online and offline social movement organizing in the pandemic era, where offline activities, such as distributing posters, often serve as a vital catalyst for online mobilization efforts.

The rise of distributed social media platforms and mesh networks, exemplified by *Mastodon*, underscores the critical need for focusing on the materiality of digitally mediated spaces. Not only do noncentralized movement communities shoulder the labor of moderating online communities, but they are also tasked with running, maintaining, and paying for independent local servers (Gehl & Zulli, 2023). These emerging dynamics have the potential to build a more robust dialogue with theories and practices of community networks (Rosa, 2022), which have long highlighted onsite care relationships as the basis of online communities (Dye, Nemer, Kumar, & Bruckman, 2019).

We borrow insights from glitch feminism (Russell, 2020) to view China's stringent COVID control and digital surveillance as a prism through which to concretize the invisible circuits of radical care within digital activism. Glitch provides a new terrain of knowing and experimentation, where intensified repression inadvertently opens fissures, allowing novel forms of resistance to emerge and thrive.

As we will show in the two cases, faced with mounting surveillance, various forms of digital activism in China since 2020 have increasingly manifested in microstruggles for the preservation of everyday physical spaces. These efforts skillfully employ a diverse set of transmedia tactics and give rise to more decentralized, anonymous, ad hoc, and feminist networks and memories—a phenomenon we identify as postdigital activism. Postdigital activism cultivates a “ghostly public,” a haunting political presence that anthropological interpretations of the White Paper Movements (An, Wang, & Ye, 2024) underscore. In our cases, artifacts created by anonymous participants serve as enduring carriers of movement memories, continuing to haunt the present long after the movement subsides. Meanwhile, postdigital forms of activism extend beyond the conventional spaces typically analyzed in social movements, such as public streets, squares, or commercial social media platforms, marked by prominent slogans, hashtags, and viral messages that are vulnerable to state repression. Instead, ghostly artifacts permeate private and quotidian domains: print shops, personal apartments, office desks, shared bicycles, protective gear, and the ambiance of LGBTQ bars, among others. Concealed from public view, these artifacts possess the radical potential to be reanimated in future resistance. We thus deepen the existing debate by explicating the processes under which particular everyday activism spaces are forged as signifiers of activist endurance.

Data and Case Studies

The researchers of this study, composed of an activist scholar and an activist, employ a co-research method that integrates our direct experiences in activism and creative expression. As labor and feminist

activists, we have manually kept a journal of key activism projects in China during the pandemic to preserve movement memories and tactics that are actively being erased by the regime. This ongoing journal includes our own activism diaries, photos taken by ourselves and activist friends, and captured screenshots from both Chinese and international social media.

The selection of these two activism cases is based on their social significance, our deep familiarity with them, and the pivotal role of activism—the intersection of art and activism—in Chinese social movements. One author was a key participant in both cases, which are connected to prominent social events widely covered by international media. The first, the Xiaohuamei T-shirt project, was initiated as a direct challenge to state crackdowns on community organizing after the Xuzhou chained woman incident in early 2022. The second case, the global Ürümqi road sign protests, was associated with the White Paper Movement, which represents a series of events protesting against China's zero-COVID policy in late 2022, the most significant mass movement in scale since the 1989 Tiananmen movement. Despite the high visibility of the chained woman incident and the White Paper Movement, media and academic attention have largely overlooked the full breadth and depth of the social activism surrounding them. For the chained women incident, news media overwhelmingly focused on online mobilization from hashtag activism to petitions, perceiving it as a continuation of the #MeToo campaigns. The White Paper Movement was often depicted as an unexpected grassroots uprising against lockdown policies. The symbolic use of blank A4 papers as a silent protest tool became the hallmark of this wave of resistance, epitomizing the dominant ways this movement was remembered. Emphasizing the crucial roles of movement artifacts embedded in decentralized logistical networks in promoting and archiving movements, the two activism cases we select serve as thick counterexamples to challenge the prevailing thin depictions of digital activism in China.

We focus on two activism projects as examples, given the significant role of art-based activism in contemporary Chinese social movements. Over the past decade, feminist, queer, and broader human rights movements have increasingly employed performance arts and documentaries to gain public visibility and challenge state authority (Bao, 2023; Tan, 2023; Wang & Liu, 2020). Our analysis builds on these efforts by exploring how collective art making can decentralize and sustain movement participation.

For the protection of the activist communities involved, our analysis exclusively uses our personal experiences and archives, avoiding any external data gathered on human subjects. We carefully anonymize names and minimize references to specific activist networks.

We also acknowledge our relative privilege as bilingual activists who can articulate these issues in English-speaking academia, a transnational cultural capital not available to most community members who lack resources and safety nets to retell their movement participation. It's a sobering reality that most involved in the Xiaohuamei and White Paper Movements opt to remain anonymous to this day, hidden away from the spotlight. This is a movement contradiction this study will reflect on in the end.

Artifact Making of Activism: The Case of Xiaohuamei T-shirts

In January 2022, amid the ongoing pandemic, a *Douyin* video documenting a visit to an impoverished family in Feng County, Xuzhou, led to a shocking discovery by netizens. In the footage, a

chained woman, Xiaohuamei, who had been trafficked and had given birth to eight children, was clearly spotted. In the next few days, the Feng County government's announcement tried to frame the abuse as a domestic dispute, claiming that the woman was locked up for abusing children and the elderly, which sparked even greater nationwide outrage. The harrowing story of Xiaohuamei stunned everyone, prompting public interrogation and forcing the government and police to continue their investigation. By March 8, under public pressure, the government had issued five announcements within a month.

During this time, netizens did more than just express their discontent on social media as suggested by most English media coverage; they spontaneously organized and published accounts of longstanding issues such as rural trafficking and the abduction of minority women, established research groups, created performance art, distributed posters and flyers offline, and drove to Feng County to directly pressure the local government. On the other hand, the government began to control public discourse, deleting Internet articles and actions as soon as they appeared, making the dissemination of such information politically risky. Those concerned about Xiaohuamei began "creative" forms of protest, and the Xiaohuamei T-shirt became one of the more successful initiatives. This direct action project was accomplished through the collaboration between worker-artist(s) anosartor and several anonymous female workers and residents in an urban village dense with family-based garment workshops. Participants collected hundreds of online statements and records of actions that the government had deleted, compiling them into an image archive of grassroots resistance. Together, they categorized and designed the layout, printing it onto a 165-meter-long white cloth (Figure 1). This cloth was then sewn, packaged and cut into more than 300 T-shirts, which were distributed around the world through the garment industry's logistics, passed from person to person, and through various anonymous channels, ultimately reaching those who cared about the issue and had spoken out. People can wear them on the streets, hang them in public and private spaces, or repurpose them into other artifacts.



Figure 1. The printed fabric for Xiaohuamei T-shirts, totaling 165 meters in length, is laid out on a cutting table, ready to be cut into shirt pieces. This scene was captured from video footage shot by an anonymous neighbor in February 2022 in a city in southern China. anosartor obtained the image from the neighbor in 2022.

Xiaohuamei T-shirts as Archive of Activism

The Xiaohuamei T-shirt initiative sets itself apart from typical digital activism in China through its meticulous archival work carried out in an anonymous and decentralized manner. It also redefines mainstream archival activism by not just digitizing materials but also materializing “rogue digital archives” (De Kosnik, 2016) through artifact making. Each unique T-shirt, cut from a single expanse of fabric, captures 50–60 individual social actions from an extensive compilation of approximately 400. A decentralized collective of activists and artists meticulously recorded these varied-scale actions daily from January 2022 to the beginning of March 2022. These social actions were chronicled from a dozen influential social media platforms, including *Weibo*, *WeChat*, *Douyin*, *Douban*, *Zhihu*, *Bilibili*, among others. Employing screenshots to preserve the posts’ visual aspects, the team methodically organized these captures onto the fabric. Because of the archiving team’s sensitivity to various social events and the logic of online dissemination, they were able to preserve a considerable portion of grassroots activism before the censorship machinery kicked in.

This extensive collection bears witness to the diverse nature of grassroots activism undertaken by both seasoned and first-timer activists. The spectrum of activism spans from online advocacy, such as scholarly sharing of cross-border marriages among ethnic minorities and the economic disparity between rural and urban areas, to oral history initiatives, including a family history series “What Made a Countryside Mentally Ill Mother?” by a blogger named Wushan Liyuexue (2022), whose mentally ill mother endured similar experiences of abduction, was forced into four marriages, and gave birth to several children in rural China.

In addition, mutual aid networks and counterinformation collectives have emerged, exemplified by the “Rural Womxn with Mental Disorders Support Group.” Originating as a call by the *WeChat* account Belonging Space (2022), it evolved into specialized task forces that aggregate data from the Web and hotlines about rural women with mental health needs, facilitating their connection with social welfare and nongovernmental organizations, thereby offering guidance and support. Even after media attention significantly declined, the group continued its research, archival, translation, and advocacy work, publishing independent reports on the chained woman incident until 2023.

The T-shirt archive also chronicles a wealth of creative and militant onsite actions. Nanjing artist Yin Ran etched the four Chinese characters “Pay Attention to Feng County (关注丰县)” onto their shoe soles, imprinting these words on wet streets and sharing a how-to guide online. The Xiaohuamei T-shirts showcase these imprinted messages. In another act, two feminist artists from Guangzhou embroidered the phrase “Please Discuss Mother’s Matters” onto a cloth. This slogan is adapted from the famous saying “do not discuss state affairs” by the writer Lao She (1958) in the play *Teahouse*, which depicts the self-censorship of discussing politics in China during the late Qing dynasty. The artists’ adaptation aims to encourage citizens to continue the fervent debate on feminism for “Mother” Xiaohuamei. Riskier endeavors include personal visits to Feng County, with two feminists, Wuyi and Quanmei, bearing flowers to Xuzhou to support the trafficking victim, only to face detention, violence, and sexual harassment by undercover police. One participant, Wuyi’s exposure of police brutality on Weibo, resulted in a severe backlash and their subsequent disappearance (Zhang, 2022), an event highlighted on the T-shirts alongside public pleas for their release.

Before their removal by the censorship machine, various images captured university students wearing T-shirts emblazoned with “Pay Attention to the Abducted Women in Feng County” or depicting the victims’ portraits. These T-shirts were notably worn in subways, quickly attracting police attention. Commuters photographed these acts of protest and shared them on Weibo, further amplifying the message. The T-shirts also displayed these Weibo posts. Moreover, students crafted handwritten notes about the Feng County incident, discreetly distributing them in women’s restrooms and near female dormitories. Images of these notes circulated online and were similarly featured on the T-shirts. The Xiaohuamei T-shirts thus serve as archives of previous movement artifacts.

Overall, by embedding social actions concerning Xiaohuamei into a physical medium rather than a digital one, the project stands as a direct act of weaving the memory of social actions in an era of pervasive digital surveillance.

Artifact in Logistic Infrastructure and Decentralized Activism

Beyond their creation, the dissemination of the Xiaohuamei T-shirts exemplifies the materiality of digital activism and how activists creatively navigate logistics and offline networks to advance direct action under oppressive conditions.

Activists employed several key tactics of decentralization and anonymity. They funneled the shirts through a cadre of movement allies to reach individuals and organizations vocal about Xiaohuamei’s issues. The recipient list included bloggers, influencers, lawyers, poets, intellectuals, artists, and writers, as well as venues like pubs and bookstores popular with the activist youth and those interested in similar causes. In an effort to bridge generational gaps, veteran feminist activists involved in diverse social justice causes were also included. Each identified recipient was sent a bundle of T-shirts.

Second, given that major courier services in China require real-name identification for parcel dispatch, the distribution process had to cleverly evade the exposure of the sender’s information. This was accomplished by using third-party delivery companies and personal trucks within various city garment markets, with the generous aid of the local retail industry and delivery workers. This reliance on a logistics network of acquaintances spotlights the often-overlooked importance of allies who may not be at the forefront of activism but provide essential support behind the scenes, a theme only recently getting scholarly attention (Tran, 2023).

Third, to prevent security forces from tracing the participants through fabric scraps produced during the T-shirts’ cutting process, these leftover scraps were sent along with the parcels (Figure 2). This approach had threefold benefits: ensuring the anonymity of participants, reworking wastes and surplus into movement artifacts, and inspiring recipients to repurpose the material. The evidence of this strategy’s success is visible in the form of fabric pieces repurposed into displays in public spaces across different cities, months after the initial distribution of the T-shirts.



Figure 2. To prevent the police from tracing the factory through discarded fabric scraps, a female villager and comrade packed these scraps into garment packaging bags to be shipped to the concerned parties. Photo by anosartor in February 2022.

Fourth, accompanying each batch of T-shirts, activists included a note that not only chronicled the item's origin and journey but also inspired the next disseminator to share it with someone else who might appreciate it. These messages were signed with a feminist alias, a deliberate tactic to preserve the operation's secrecy and underscore the solidarity and discreet support of the community for the cause. The use of anonymous signatures also serves as a direct refusal to the male-led social movement culture in China, which often emphasizes the personal branding of male activists at the cost of extracting unpaid labor of womxn and queer activists.

The dissemination of Xiaohuamei T-shirts also hinges on the creative contributions of anonymous participants. For instance, college students came up with the idea of placing these T-shirts in the baskets of shared bicycles parked near the densely populated dormitory areas. The prevalent use of these dockless bikes by the youth across China, coupled with the bikes' high mobility, ensures that these T-shirts are seen in numerous unexpected places.

As a social movement artifact, the Xiaohuamei T-shirt project has mobilized an anonymous, decentralized, and fluid network of activists, artists, makers, and ally workers operating within the logistical framework. It exemplifies how a tangible object can serve as a vessel for collective memory and a tool for mobilization, far beyond the ephemeral nature of many digital activism.

Ürümqi Road Sign: Artifacts of Trans-local Activism

The Ürümqi Road Sign is a digital activism project in the White Paper Movements, with produced artifacts appearing in more than 80 protest sites across Asia, Europe, and North America. The White Paper

Movement was sparked by a tragic fire on November 24, 2022, exacerbated by stringent pandemic policies since 2020 and longstanding settler colonialism in Xinjiang. A welded-shut door in an apartment building in Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang, trapped Uyghur residents during a fire, resulting in the death of at least 10 Uyghurs, including two children. In the aftermath, protesters gathered on Shanghai's Ürümqi Middle Road to mourn the victims and protest the nearly three-year-long pandemic policies that have caused numerous economic and social crises (Connery, 2022). For the post-1989 generation in China, this marked a pivotal moment as many young people took to the streets for the first time.

In the hours following the protest, anonymous activist(s) *anosartor* created a digital downloadable toolkit, which contained bilingual instructions and source files enabling individuals to use home printers to create life-sized replicas of the "Ürümqi Middle Road" street sign. In a move to reclaim cultural agency, the electronic sign restored the Uyghur script for "Ürümqi," replacing the Han-centric pinyin previously used, and the numerical part indicated the date of the Shanghai protest. The toolkit also included A4-sized paper and sticker versions of the sign for public use, lowering the barriers to activism. The download link was disseminated via a QR code on multiple versions of online posters (*anosartor*, 2023).

On the late night of November 26, Shanghai authorities dispersed and arrested many protesters near Ürümqi Middle Road, even removing an actual road sign from the location. Right after the mass arrest, the digital version of the Ürümqi Middle Road sign became a viral sensation on the Internet, shared widely through various social media and messaging platforms such as *Twitter (X)*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *WeChat*, *Telegram*, *Signal*, and *Mastodon*. In the following days, major cities like Beijing, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Hong Kong, London, Amsterdam, New York, Los Angeles, and Tokyo, along with numerous smaller municipalities, organized their own protests and vigils. These gatherings were in solidarity with the Shanghai protest and other recent tragic events, such as the bus tragedy in Guizhou, the Foxconn protests and mass exodus in Zhengzhou, and the A4 paper protests at Nanjing Communication College. Predictably, the protests within China were swiftly suppressed, with most participants and their associates being summoned and interrogated by authorities.

Over the next month, the Internet saw a flood of photos featuring printed replicas of the Ürümqi Middle Road sign from various locations across the globe. These signs, often accompanied by flowers and candles, became fixtures at protest sites—on streets, parks, public squares, university campuses, embassy fronts, iconic buildings, or areas with a high concentration of Chinese diaspora. Diaspora communities shared numerous images of the sign standing silently in urban spaces, with passersby leaving flowers at its base. Other photos, many taken by activists in China, showed posters and stickers of the sign in living rooms, bars, workstations, inside wallets, and even on masks. People continuously used the downloadable toolkit to create these signs for their protests, capturing and sharing the moments online, creating a global tapestry of solidarity and remembrance (Figure 3).



Figure 3. One of many road signs that protesters made using a family printer. Image from an open Telegram group, obtained by anosartor, November 28, 2022.

The Postdigital Diffusion of Ürümqi Road Sign

The diffusion of the Ürümqi Road Sign protest exemplifies what we refer to as postdigital. The dissemination on digital platforms relies on people printing, projecting, adapting, and creating artifacts related to the Ürümqi Middle Road offline, which in turn stimulates subsequent online diffusion. In essence, this temporal cycle of offline experimentation, online broadcasting, offline creation, and subsequent online broadcasting is indispensable.

More specifically, before the White Paper Movement gained momentum, a few *Instagram* and *Twitter/X* profiles owned by diaspora Chinese communities played a pivotal role in circulating personal narratives from the pandemic and broadcasting news suppressed by the government. These accounts themselves have become a digital archive of grassroots resistance. Not surprisingly, anonymous users forwarded materials and photographs capturing protests with the iconic road sign to these platforms, which in turn spurred more activists to embrace this tactic. People not only printed and produced these signs, but often added their own creative twists. A notable instance involved three demonstrators brandishing a self-styled sign, mirroring a viral photo of workers in hard hats dismantling a street sign on Ürümqi Middle Road in Shanghai.

The road sign file quickly rose to prominence as the top download among the spontaneous poster archives of the time, likely because of several key factors. First, many White Paper Movement posters were laden with explicit political messages, but the movement itself was not underpinned by a cohesive political

ideology. Its ranks were filled with individuals frustrated by lockdowns, some seeking to honor victims, while others intent on challenging the existing political order. Internally, the movement also grappled with significant gender-based tensions and the still-low representation of working class and ethnic minorities (An et al., 2024). The road sign, in stark contrast, stood as a quiet but resilient emblem of the cityscape, its visual distinctiveness making it widely accessible and adaptable. Second, the design was printer-friendly, accommodating even those with scant hardware resources to produce small keepsakes or QR code-enhanced posters for physical distribution. Finally, the anonymity of the sign's design fostered a spirit of mutual aid and noncentralized sharing, detaching the movement from any particular artist and instead, underscoring movement urgency and collective expression.

Compared with the Xiaohuamei T-shirts, the production and modification of road sign artifacts are more decentralized, thus granting distributors greater autonomy. Although recipients of T-shirts and fabric scraps also have the option to rework these items, they are often constrained by the existing form of the material. In contrast, the distribution of street signs relies on household printers and design software, significantly lowering the barriers and political risks for the average person to modify and adapt the original files. Our observations also note the concurrent availability of numerous open-source White Paper Movement materials, including printable protest posters, informational leaflets, and laser-cut files calling for the release of detainees.

Ürümqi Road Sign as Archival Activism

The White Paper protests in China quickly subsided within a week amid intense repression. Authorities arrested protesters in major cities and rigorously interrogated anyone connected to the movement, including uninvolved acquaintances of protesters. Notably, womxn and queer participants were disproportionately targeted by the police, with most detainees being womxn (Shen & Qi, 2023). This suggests an increasingly hawkish stance by the government toward the feminist movement. Concurrently, the government abruptly reversed its zero-COVID policy, a pivot that led to a spike in COVID-19 fatalities, which the authorities then attributed to the White Paper Movement. Official narratives fueled nationalist sentiment, painting the demonstrators as puppets of foreign forces. Abroad, the White Paper remained a topic of relentless discussion among the exiled community, while silent, enforced amnesia took hold within mainland China, with pervasive fear and surveillance creating chasms of disconnect.

In an effort akin to the Xiaohuamei T-shirt to preserve the memory of the movement, activists created an open-source zine *Story of Ürümqi Road Sign* (anosartor and others, 2023), which was added to the original sharable folder for the protest. This zine chronicled the process of the road sign protests and the imagery of global dissent since late 2022. Easily reproducible with a home printer and stapler, this continuously updated zine has been downloaded in various formats and disseminated through a decentralized network of activists to peers in other cultural and movement spaces (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The Story of Ürümqi Roadsign zine displayed in an anarchist community kitchen by the Burmese exiles in Mae Sot, Thailand. Photo by anosartor in February 2024.

From Xiaohuamei T-shirt to Ürümqi Road Sign: Artifacts as Activism Afterlives

Artifact making and distribution exhibit a different strand of movement methodology than public rallies and petitions. They rekindle a feminist DIY culture (Chidgey, 2012) and what McKinney (2020) terms “quieter infrastructures,” the often messy and nonspectacular ways of doing feminism. These practices are not aimed at eliciting a response from the state or tempered by its potential concessions, often provoked by media attention. Rather, they focus on preserving the collective memory of the movement and cultivating a broader protest culture, operating independently of the state and its censorship apparatus, aligning more with direct actions in an anarchist tradition.

Artifacts made during the two projects, T-shirts, real-size road signs, stickers, and fabric decors, provide an enduring onsite space for memorization and mourning. Even after the initial movements die down, most artifacts remain in spaces such as participants’ carry-on backpacks and luggage, phone cases and laptops, and cooperative spaces. Our collaborators often shared unexpected images of unfamiliar people and places where these artifacts appeared, illustrating their reach. These artifacts also serve within an alternative gift economy among activists and artists, where exchanging these items at no cost fosters and sustains camaraderie.

The endurance of movement artifacts is particularly crucial in the Chinese context, as the state is adept at wiping out cyber activism traces within its digital sovereignty. Although the politics of digital disappearance is a universal phenomenon posing challenges for archival activism and infrastructural critique (Ben-David, 2016; Driscoll & Paloque-Berges, 2017), the reaction window for activists is extremely short in China. Yang’s (2022) investigation into lockdown diaries during the pandemic reveals that many of these firsthand accounts have vanished, with only manual archives enduring as a memory repository. Similarly,

the remaining discussions of the Xiaohuamei and White Paper Movements predominantly exist in overseas cyberspace, which is difficult to access for users in China. Although tech-savvy users can still retrieve related archives using circumvention tools, these discussions often lack the rich details of on-the-ground organizing.

On the contrary, the semiprivate, subtle, and artistic nature of movement artifacts often allows them to evade the focused attention of authorities. Although they might not have the power to further spark public debates, they serve as enduring records that validate the contributions and experiences of the activists involved. This is particularly crucial in the post-White Paper era when the state deliberately assigned the blame on participants for causing massive COVID-19 deaths following the abrupt end of the zero-COVID policy in late 2022. Meanwhile, because the design templates of most artifacts remain, they can easily be modified and reproduced in a future event to evoke past movement memories. With the rapid expansion of exiled Sinophone communities in North America, Europe, and Japan, we have witnessed the reemergence of the Ürümqi road sign in diaspora commemorations of the White Paper Movement's anniversary and other human rights events across Europe in 2023.

Discussion

Risks of Artifacts and the Values of Slowness

It is worth reiterating that designing, manufacturing, and distributing movement artifacts are not without political risks. Contrary to pure digital activism, it requires the intricate risk calculation of each step embedded in the logistical supply chain, an activist skillset developed over years of interacting with both digital platforms and local entities. A single misstep can be catastrophic for both the project and its participants. For example, we learned that a concurrent project distributing T-shirts honoring Xiaohuamei faced an immediate crackdown because of surveillance on an online vendor, leading to police intervention and exposure of the activists.

The unfortunate repression of this parallel project has prompted us to reflect on feasible ways of resisting carceral and surveillance technology accelerated by platform capitalism. Although online channels offer speed and reach, they also present risks of unforeseeable surveillance, suggesting a trade-off between efficiency and privacy. Offline methods may provide better anonymity at the cost of speed, and they also require solid personal connections that are not always available to activists.

Moreover, the goal of such activism is not necessarily to elicit immediate state action, allowing for flexibility in timing. Delays in distributing Xiaohuamei T-shirts because of China's COVID control, for instance, inadvertently prolonged the movement's resonance. The late arrival of T-shirts and pieces of cloth invoked memories of resistance months after the explosion of public anger and media attention. For the Ürümqi road sign project, team members consciously postponed the dissemination of files on commercial social media platforms. They allowed nonteam members to release the files first, a tactic that not only bolstered security measures but also helped to decentralize the influence of the project. This deliberate slowdown in information spread goes against the grain of rapid digital mobilization, which is often seen as a hallmark of effective activism.

These deliberate and incidental strategies defy the conventional valorization of speed in activism, a topic that has only recently begun to receive critical attention in social movement studies (Blanc, 2022). They call for a thoughtful reassessment of the values of “slowness” as a tactical approach in a time characterized by heightened logistical surveillance and control.

Recentering Materiality for Building Cross-Class Solidarity

In digital activism research, it has been observed that digital environments don't automatically lead to more equal movements but often perpetuate preexisting gender and class hierarchies (Schradié, 2019; von Bülow, 2018). In China, movements like #MeToo have revitalized grassroots feminism, yet they are limited by norms of digital space, primarily engaging the urban middle class and those highly educated. The crafting and dissemination of tangible artifacts analyzed above draw participants out from the confines of digital platforms, fostering genuine interactions with people within the offline service supply chain. This multilayered engagement thus extends beyond the virtual echo chambers, where platform algorithms and state controls frequently segment online activism.

Postdigital activism integrates the nondigital, tangible aspects of action with digital tactics, thereby crafting a more inclusive approach that transcends class barriers. In both cases we analyzed, there is a higher involvement by working-class participants. Especially for the Xiaohuamei T-shirt project, young female garment workers, who are arguably the closest to the production chain, became the essential creators and makers of activist actions. Although the chained woman's incident became a global headline, many women workers have only heard of it via engagement in this action, implying the ingrained class segregation and the digital divide in urban China. However, by leveraging their unique garment-making skills, these workers have transformed their role in activism, overturning established social movement hierarchy and placing themselves at the center of creative and impactful activism. This invites a call for a more nuanced examination of methods for cultivating cross-class solidarity and deconstructing class-based hierarchies within digital activism.

Ghost in Artifacts: Decentralization and Feminist Movement Methodology

Amid tightening political control, artifact-centered digital communication signifies a new, spectral form of movement tactic. It emphasizes anonymity, changeability, and decentralization, diverging from male-centric, leader-focused social movement strategies. Although the scale of artifact creation and dissemination is limited, the network of social movements quietly expands through mutual care and subtle support among participants (Figure 5).

This ghostly participation, nevertheless, presents a range of substantial challenges. The task of documenting the movement encounters hurdles because of the participants' vigilance in maintaining online anonymity—evidenced by their routine changing of online IDs and the intentional erasure of their digital footprints, which disrupts the continuity of communication. The blurring line between activists and nonactivists in a noncentralized organizing network adds to the complication. Each link in the communication chain not only relays but also reshapes the message, altering the trajectory of the activism in unpredictable ways. Our narratives thus capture only a fraction of the broader networks of mobilization. Moreover, the

egalitarian and anonymous nature of participation creates a paradox that weakens the effectiveness of this model. Unlike leadership-driven movements, such as human rights activism in China, anonymous activists do not gain personal benefits from their involvement, such as increased online popularity or cultural capital. This lack of formal recognition also restricts their access to crucial social resources, including grassroots donations, legal aid, and media coverage, particularly during times of repression. Consequently, these dynamics contribute to a lack of focus on such forms of activism, inadvertently bolstering the elite and androcentric tendencies of conventional activism, which often overshadow or co-opt the contributions of womxn and queer.

In the near future, therefore, it is imperative to examine how this ghostly participation could survive and thrive in a centralized and patriarchal movement culture.



Figure 5. In the top right corner of the image are fabric scraps turned into ornaments, one of over 300 hundred packages, accompanied by stickers, zines, pins, and memorabilia related to womxn and queer liberation. Photo taken by an anonymous community member at a lesbian bar in central China, June 2022, and shared with anosartor.

Conclusion

This article analyzes two activist actions during the pandemic in China, highlighting how digital activism navigates an intensified authoritarian digital landscape by blending online and offline methods and reappropriating materiality. Both cases demonstrate a heavy reliance on social movement artifacts, such as T-shirts and road signs, that are produced, circulated, and re-created through anonymous cross-city logistics and communication networks. These artifacts serve dual roles: as tangible, immediate archives of social movements and as malleable objects readily adaptable to other social and archival endeavors. Beyond fostering a novel blueprint for protest mobilization, these artifacts are woven into the fabric of everyday

resistance, allowing for their collection, sharing, and commemoration—thus, they embody the enduring afterlives of activism. The analysis posits that such artifact-driven postdigital activism spawns more decentralized gender and class-inclusive resistance networks, meriting further academic exploration.

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