A WAILING WALL IN CYBERSPACE: LONELINESS, CENSORSHIP, AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY[1] – IN MEMORY OF DR. LI WENLIANG, THE WHISTLE BLOWER

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Abstract

As the whistle blower of the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, Dr. Li Wenliang was dismissed as the spreader of rumors and punished by the authorities. His later death from the coronavirus outraged the netizens in China on various social platforms. His post on Weibo, written by Dr. Li on the day he was finally diagnosed as infected, has thus become a wailing wall in cyberspace. It has invited millions of Weibo comments below, both from those who lost their loved ones in the outbreak and netizens in general. The post functions as a monument in cyberspace for people to commemo-

rate the bereft in the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, the first place where Covid-19 was reported. Considering the transmediality of cyberspace of our modern times, the phenomenon of online mourning urges a semiotic explanation, especially when it concerns a figure who only became famous after his death. The study aims to conceptualize the dynamics of collective memory with the monument in cyberspace following the insights of Eco's concept of "the open text". The wailing wall in cyberspace functions as a mnemonic text for members of society, which interacts with the collective memory restored in the social sphere. Moreover, censorship also played an important role in the formation of the wailing wall. All these features are brought together to make the wailing wall in the cyberspace a unique spectacle in online culture, which paves the way for further discussions in the future.

Keywords: collective memory, modern loneliness, censorship, online mourning

Introduction

Few would know Li Wenliang, an ophthalmic doctor at The Central Hospital of Wuhan, if not for the outbreak of Covid-19 in December 2019. Famed as the "whistle-blower", Li was one of the first "insiders" in the medical system to warn his friends and relatives that there was a "SARS-like" virus in Wuhan[2]. However, the government refused to admit that the virus was highly infectious and dismissed the warning as rumors. On Jan. 1st, news came that there were rumors of "new SARS", and eight persons were investigated by the police for spreading rumors. On Jan. 3rd, Li was summoned to the police station in his district and criticized for spreading rumors. The police station also gave him a verbal admonition and asked him to sign a document claiming that he would never spread such rumors, with the texts of "I can [stop spreading the rumors]" and "I understand [that spreading rumors is a crime]"[3]

On Jan. 8th, Li accepted a patient who had glaucoma. However, he did not realize that the patient was also coughing. The patient had a fever the next day, and the relatives of the patient also had a fever that same evening.

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[2] Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is a respiratory disease caused by coronavirus. It originated from Guang Dong Province, China and caused an outbreak in many Asian countries from 2002 to 2004.

[3] This also led to later revolts against the government titled "I cannot" and "I don't understand".

Li reported this to the hospital. The patient was then transferred to another hospital, while Li himself started coughing and got a fever the next day. On Jan. 12th, Li had a CT and was suspected of infection in his respiration system. On Feb. 1st, he was diagnosed with Covid-19 and died from pneumonia on Feb. 6th. He was reported dead in the evening of that day. Within a couple of hours, all such reports were deleted from all social platforms and replaced by the news that Li was still under treatment. In the early morning of Feb. 7th, he was reported dead again. This capricious report instigated anger throughout the internet, and people swarmed Dr. Li's last post on Weibo, the Chinese Twitter, to express their anger[4]. Some of those were censored and deleted by the platform, but the post was not deleted, and people continued to comment below. It has become a monument marking the darkest time for Chinese citizens and functions as a wailing wall in cyberspace for everyone. It is not exclusive to those under the lockdown, to express emotions about what they cannot say in daily lives.

The phenomenon of the wailing wall in cyberspace raises concerns in several aspects. On the one hand, the internet brought the "over-abundance of information of all kind" (Manovich 2001: 55), yet the last post of Dr. Li remains a monument, not submerged by tons of information. In contrast to other "hot" issues that raise great concern among netizens but turn into oblivion in a relatively short time, the post by Dr. Li remains a place for everyone who sympathizes with the tragic happenings on him and leaves remarks to express their own emotions. On the other hand, the tension between censorship and online mourning was incorporated into the memory of what exactly happened to Dr. Li, thus causing an ambiguity of memories among people. To mourn means that we still remember something. The maneuvers of the government can only fog the memory of a happening but cannot delete it. This instead keeps the vibrancy of the wailing wall. The mechanism behind the memory under the supervision of censorship requires a detailed investigation.

Combining the two aspects mentioned above, the practice of online mourning begets the question of its essence. This is different from normal mourning in real life, which has a particular object of mourning (a deceased relative, or the heroes who fought in a decisive battle). The object of online mourning has far exceeded the tragic happenings of Li and netizens can say everything in front of the wailing wall. It would be a mere simplification, if we set a direct isomorph between mourning as a daily practice and online mourning, though, indeed, they share certain similarities.

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[4] Original Post: https://m.weibo.cn/1139098205/4467107636950632.

With all the regards mentioned above, the following article seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the specificities of a post in cyberspace, and what is the relationship between Dr. Li and the commentators below?

2. What motivates people to comment on a post about a tragic past? Why do people reveal their own sorrows under the post?

3. How does censorship function on internet platforms, and how does it affect people's memories of a particular event, in our case here, of the tragic happenings on Dr. Li?

4. What is the difference between mourning and remembering? When a clear collective memory of Dr. Li is impossible, what are the commentators mourning? What are the differences between mourning Li and other public figures?

All four questions will be studied under an interdisciplinary scope within the framework of memory studies, media studies, and political philosophy. By focusing on an online memorial culture, a study of the wailing wall in cyberspace will create up new links between media studies and memory studies. They will build upon the existent liaison between the two, especially taking online censorship into consideration. By positioning itself at the juncture, the study also contributes to future studies on different phenomena witnessed in cyberspace, especially on online mourning in the context of censorship.

The Post as a Text: A Monument in the Cyberspace

The post of Dr. Li is not alone. It is situated among texts of all kinds about the lockdown: other personal utterances about the experiences under the lockdown, news reports, government announcements, and other kinds of textual representations in society. In the cultural spaces, multiple texts function interconnectively, forging an intertextual place and intermedial sphere (Ojamaa, Marjaa; Torop, Peeter 2014). In Lotman's (1977) words, a text shall not only be studied for its inner structures and hierarchies but also its relations with the outer sphere and extra-textual structures. When we focus on one text as the object of our study, the other related texts shall not be left aside.

Firstly, the post itself refers to what exactly happened to Dr. Li from blowing the whistle to his death. The post has become a mnemonic tool for people to remember his tragic story; as Ann Rigney underscored, these texts "help make particular events memorable by figuring the past in a

structured way that engages the sympathies of the reader or viewer." (2008: 347) As remnants of an event that happened in history, the post provides "fixed points of reference" as a textual monument (*ibid*. 349), a place for deliberately "interrupt[ing] ordinary time" (Kattago 2020: 115). As the "place of memory" (Nora 1989)[5], in order for certain discourses to circulate, the possibility of such remembrance is pre-given due to the referential manner. It does not matter if the censorship from authorities is active or not and this will be the topic of the following sections.

Secondly, as a monument in cyberspace, it is situated in different contexts and social spheres. As an index of the event which happened to Li, the post also links to texts about other tragic happenings in that exact place (Wuhan), during that certain period (the lockdown). In lockdown, the sad story happened not only to Dr. Li but to other residents of Wuhan as well. Many lost their loved ones during the outbreak. Such sad stories were collected and a space was created for all texts to endorse and footnote each other. This joint effort of different texts constitutes an intertextual reality maintained by members of the society who share those texts, thus constructing the memory of the lockdown in general. These texts are widely observed on online platforms, especially when people could not leave their own houses under the lockdown. Moreover, the post itself does not provide much about the details of Li's story. Those who are interested in the story and eager to know what happened exactly to Dr. Li will resort to other texts observed in the social sphere, which contain not only the tragic experience of Li but also other heart-breaking stories. In this vein, rather than being an official memory characterized by a physical monument, the new "network memory" rising from the digital space transcends the characteristics of the dynamic "organ" memory of humankind and the "artificial memory" of media (Hoskins 2009). Therefore, memories of Li are interwoven with the memories of others under lockdown, whether they are memories of one's own or textual memories of others read from social platforms. When people are interacting with the post, what they are interacting with is a series of traumatic memories of the lockdown.

Moreover, as a post on Weibo, a popular online platform in China, it conforms to the modality of a post. This means that the author of the post can decide who can see and comment on the post at a particular time point. On a social platform, because texts are too easily accessed by a few clicks, taps, or swipes, the only space of communication is the intertextual space. All online communications bear the imprints of intertextuality and refer

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[5] "Les Lieux de Memoire".

to other texts. For example, the so-called "communities" on the platforms establish the identity of the group by posting under the same hashtags. The institutions in the social sphere also claim their authority by posting and receiving comments in a chain of texts. Anyone can comment on any post except if the original poster forbids it. This decentralization leads to everyone being able to access and comment on anything (ideally). Coming back to the post of Dr. Li (he did not ban strangers from commenting), every user of Weibo can comment below. He opened the post to everyone and did not close the comment area, in which everyone is welcomed to participate in prolonging the vitality of the text. In this regard, the post as a text in the internet space is open synchronically with all the intertextual linkages, and diachronically by progressing forward. Once there are still people commenting, the text will remain an open text and not finished. Therefore, the post is a text in progress. When the text appears on the platform, it leaves the hands of the original author and enters the intertextual space. Barthes (1977) termed this as the "death of the author". However, the author's death (both in the biological sense in our case and in Barthes' sense) does not mean that the text ceases to change. Eco stated that this kind of text is "[f]ar from being fully accounted for and catalogued, [and] deploy and pose problems in several dimensions. In short, it is an 'open' situation, in movement. A work in progress." (1979: 65) Following Eco's insights, commenting below the post makes it a progressing text, in which every commentator becomes the co-author. People gather under the post and participate in developing the text and transform the text onward, generating new meanings during its progression.

When comments accumulate, the post, as a monument, is "calibrated" (Rigney 2008: 351) towards a certain place in the intertextual space. Dr. Li's last post has asserted its place in the social sphere during the calibration as a wailing wall in cyberspace. It is a place where every netizen can become involved in progressing it forward and communicating their own memories about Li in the venue provided by the monument. The collective practice of repeating information already known by all the participants is, of course, not redundant. By participating in the dynamics of the text, the memory of Dr. Li is kept vivid and enhanced. Whenever a comment is added below the post, the memory of Li, which may be temporarily absent from the consciousness of the commentator, is revoked and consolidated by re-remembering what happened at that time. As Renate Lachmann noted, "[p]articipation works as revoking past texts, as sharing and repetition" (2008: 307). Lotman conceptualized this kind of communication as "I-I communication", or autocommunication (1990: 21), paralleling the

"I-(s)he communication" in our daily practice. He further underscores that the "'I-I' system qualitatively transforms the information, and this leads to a restructuring of the actual 'I' itself." (*ibid*. 22) If we expand the notion of "I" to a community with shared memories, this autocommunication of such memories begets mutual recognition between individuals belonging to the community. Via the I-I communication channel, individuals recognize each other as "one of us". This further constructs identification in oneself and between each other. Moreover, the post is "transferred in time" (Lotman 1990: 21), as the autocommunication between the participants of the commentary generates new meanings of the text, shedding lights on the transformation from a post on Weibo to a wailing wall in cyberspace.

The inclusiveness of others during the progression of the text leads to the performativity of the authors. A post or comment, if the author does not forbid it, can be seen by all platform users. In this regard, all the users can access it. Thence, all the authors (the readers are also included here) are aware that their comments can be read by all. The temporality of the text is thus flattened. Performance is "a shared activity, where time and duration are dictated in the present as a 'live act'"(Richards 2018: 13). It requires its audience *in presentia*, which means that every performance happens "here" and "now". For all the users who comment below the post, the performance starts precisely when (s)he presses the "comment" button. This instantaneity of the performance leads to the phenomenon that those comments are not performed chronologically; they are only in parallel spatially. When the performers take to the stage, they know only three things: the theme (the post of Dr. Li); his/her role (the co-author of the text); and the place where (s)he will be commenting (including the "invisible" audience). In other words, every commentator below the post has his or her own private relationship with Li and all the comments before it becomes a static text, a crystalized workpiece. This is evidenced by the fact that some of the comments are "seemingly" private, i.e., words that they cannot say in their daily routines.

Moreover, as Tim Jordan noted that "performativity is the relation in which the performance produces both the performed and the performer" (2013: 21). In a post, the audience can also become performers without the need to surpass any threshold. It welcomes everyone to be its author, thus giving it a high level of creativity. Therefore, everyone commenting under the post is fully aware that their comments are not only towards Li, but also presented to all the other co-authors of the text and read by them. In this regard, the tension between the privateness and the openness of the comments is constructed. On the one hand, the commentators express

their emotions in a highly private way, about their own griefs and sorrows. On the other hand, they understand that their comments will be seen by all the others who scroll down and read these comments since all these online platforms are an open space. This tension leads to an unescapable discussion on a human condition in modernity that motivates the performance in the cyberspace: loneliness.

From Modern Loneliness to Talking to a Dead

Hannah Arendt underscores that "all human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together, but it is only action that cannot even be imagined outside the society of men." (1998: 22) The need for socializing is one of the most basic human conditions according to which every member of the society recognizes his or her own position in society. People recognize each other as the same as themselves and in return secure their own identities as individuals. The "looking-glass self" (Cooley 1983: 88) maintains our personal identity as ourselves and constructs an everyday world of one's nearby, constructed by "objective relationships" which come from "the intermediary of a common world of things" (Arendt 1998: 58). The support from others, physically and emotionally, secures the being of individuals in society. Durkheim (2002 [1897]) points out that in regions where people were connected more closely, the suicide rate was relatively lower than that in regions with more remote relationships. In the regions with a lower rate, people refrain from suicide due to the interest of the community they live in or the emotional linkages they had with their neighbors. However, under modern circumstances, these objective relationships are under attack. The massive technological development enables us as individuals to achieve things that could not be imagined before, but it also dissects us because we can do them by ourselves. Individual freedom in our modern times also means that one is responsible for all the cadences throughout his/her life.

The absence of others in our own lives and the deprivation of these objective relationships with others lead to the phenomenon of modern loneliness (Riesman 2001). In other words, as Biao Xiang noted in an interview show in China[6], the nearby is shrinking, if not collapsing, and our looking-glass selves are becoming blurred. The price of modernity is that we are finally alienated from the world we used to be acquainted with (Arendt 1998: 254). The development of online networks intensified this loneliness. Everyone

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[6] https://v.qq.com/x/cover/mzc00200fl1xds9/o3026pze76s.html; for more about the idea of the disappearing nearby in English, also see Xiang's seminar: https://www.arct.cam. ac.uk/events/the-cambridge-city-seminar-series-the-nearby2014a-scale-of-knowing.

has become a lonely being in the world, especially under the development of the internet technology that everyone turns into "ghostly faces", with the ability to do everything except for the presence of physicality (Warner and Hartog 2020; cited from Kattago 2021). Berger and Luckmann underscore that "[t]he most important experience of others takes place in the face-to-face situation, which is the prototypical case of social interaction. All other cases are derivatives of it." (1966: 43) Diminishing face-to-face interaction weakens the basis of the mechanism of looking-glass self, which is vanishing under the development of information of technology. It should be noted that the looking-glass self will not evaporate, considering that there are still interactions between individuals as families, close friends, etc., yet atomization does not only happen metaphorically. It happens literally, as the cybernetic space is expanding and overshadowing our real life. What is happening on the other side of the globe wins our attention. However, we do not even pay a glimpse at what is happening around us anymore.

The disappearance of the nearby and the atomization of individuals lead to a need to reconstruct the lost relationships. People are in dire need of being heard by others with flesh and bones. The lure of cyberspace persists and pretends to be a "better world" than the infertile reality. While the nearby in real life is shrinking, everything online is within a few types and clicks. Therefore, the need for reconstructing the nearby is thus transferred from real lives to virtual ones as substitutions. In order to transcend the fog of cyberspace, where all creatures are behind a painted veil, they need to make their own outcry and call for this recognition. The performativity of the text presumes that the authors of the texts are "being looked at"[7] by their potential audiences. In other words, these authors reveal parts of them and put them under the scrutiny of all platform users. In this way, the loneliness intensified by the advent of internet technology is compensated by personal performance as texts online.

However, the mass amount of information online overwhelms people's attention and leaves the call for reconstructing the relationship to a great extent unnoticed. In an information-rich society, attention has become a limited resource (Falkinger 2008). In fact, most commentators know that their comments might not be read by anyone. Dr. Li, as a dead person, is

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[7] It should be noted that the "being looked at" discussed here is different from the notion of "to-be-looked-at-ness" discussed in female studies. The latter refers to a male gaze under which females become a spectacle and males as the bearer of the gaze (Mulvey 1989; Chow 1995; 2010), whereas the "being looked at" discussed here refers to a potential gaze from the audience when individuals present their texts on a public space, regardless of the gender of the audience and the performer.

obviously not bothered by the overflow of information, which means that he is always there to listen to the commentators. The atomization between individuals is dispelled from the side of the listener; and the potentials of being recognized by others makes commenting below the post an enterprise worthy of trying. In this way, an eccentric balance between openness and privateness is thus constructed. Individuals post their comments, perform themselves, and want to be observed by others and be recognized by others as real humankind. However, the essence of the online network presumes that the overwhelming influx of information will make every outcry a drop in the water that is barely heard. In other words, the privacy presumed by the openness of the post is cracked in by the performativity of the comments and modern loneliness is thus exorcised, yet the exclusiveness is rebuilt by the fact that nobody else would care. The post, therefore, has become the battleground for individuals to fight against their loneliness with a fragile balance between openness and privacy.

Apart from the modern loneliness exacerbated by the internet, there are more practical reasons why people swarm in Dr. Li's last post. Why do people come especially to this post to share their loneliness? As argued above, a dead person's last post is indeed an ideal place to mourn the loss of unmediated personal socializing. However, if we look back to the comments themselves, they seldom focus on the exact reference of the post itself, which is about the tragic happenings of Li. They are instead determined by the intertextual "climate" of the platform, as evidenced by the fact that these comments, if put in chronological order, are affected by the other texts that appear in different periods (Zhou and Zhong 2021; Zheng, Adams, and Wang 2021). If the memory of Dr. Li were still clear, the progression of the text would lead to an end in itself, as there would be no more new intertextual relationships constructed, many of the later comments would be seen as irrelevant, and the post would fall into oblivion as the natural decay of memory happens. The meaning of the text in the later stages would be "increasingly difficult to renegotiate and change" (Iedema 2001: 35). However, in Dr. Li's case, the progression of the text is not calibrated to a more precise meaning as Rigney argues (2008: 351). However, a more ambiguous memory that only the sorrowful feelings are left, and the post keeps its vibrancy up until now. Over the passage of time, the wailing wall in cyberspace has lost the clear index to the event that it referred to. In other words, in Dr. Li's case, there should be a forced ambiguity that provides vacant places for the commentators to bring their own experiences to keep the post vibrant. In this regard, we need to take one step backward to see how the ambiguity occurred.

Censorship and Ambiguity of Memory

There is no doubt that natural decay of memory (Candia et al. 2019) will fog our remembrance of a past event, especially in an age where prosthetic memory (Landsberg 2004) is born out of the convergence of media (Jenkins 2006). Our memory itself becomes transmedial. Nevertheless, some activities in the social sphere can accelerate the process. As stated above, the progression of the text is maintained by the comments in the time span. Moreover, these comments can also function by themselves as texts communicated in the social sphere about the collective memory of an event, which will channel the progression of the text. Therefore, the comments of the post are not only part of the open text, but also metatexts redefining the text continually (Popovič 1976). During the progression of the text, some of its metatexts may be censored and deleted, which means that the texts used for constructing certain memories are no longer available. Starting from the death of Li, hundreds of posts about the anger of the authority's suspension of the fact (as briefly introduced in the introduction)[8] and related comments directly under Li's post were deleted from Weibo. People with indignation suddenly realized that they were alone. On the platform, there were no others who thought as (s)he did, and all the official tongues were talking about grand narratives that went against their own memories. Li's post was still there, yet no one talked about his death openly in the social sphere. If the nearby in real lives was still there, people could communicate such happenings secretly. However, as discussed above, the nearby shrank and the situation was exacerbated under the restrictions of lockdown. The only channel of communication in society were those platforms under the supervision of censorship. The comment area, which used to be popular, became a quiet place, with only a few comments written in coded speech. However, the time affiliated to the comments said something, and certain comments were deleted.

If censorship only means that access to certain text is forbidden, all censorships function in a bad way, otherwise, we would not know that there is censorship, especially in our modern digital era. However, this is not what the censorship is aiming at. The real aim of censorship is on the meta texts in the following, namely the communication *about* the original text

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[8] Hereby the author of this research thanks the owner of the channel "Simplified Chinese Cyber-Graveyard", @WuhanCensored on Telegram, for the massive work on collecting the censored posts, pictures and incidents during lockdown and after. It would be impossible for the author to know how massively the authority tried to crack down "heterogeneous discourses" without the help of the channel.

in the social sphere. Every individual can access Li's story with a slight effort. However, they cannot talk about it in the social sphere. As discussed in the above sections, collective memory requires autocommunication in the community to maintain its vitality. In Dr. Li's case, the comment area is both a place for autocommunication where commentators can recognize each other because of the monumental uniqueness of the post, and a place for metacommunication to progress the text forward. There could have been more places for autocommunication and metacommunication, but the shrinking of the nearby reduces space in real lives, and all online texts finally direct any such communications to the original monument in the cyberspace.

Therefore, when censorship tries to remove metatexts regarding the metacommunication of Dr. Li's tragic happenings, it also deletes the textual basis for people recognizing each other. In the social sphere no more public texts are available to function as the vehicle of autocommunication. The autocommunicative channel is severed and people are atomized again. Autocommunication is therefore reduced to the personal level of secret channels in the corners of the social sphere, in order to fulfill the need for recognition. Lacking a public venue makes this extremely hard for the masses. In the case of Dr. Li, the deletion of comments regarding the fact of Dr. Li's admonition and dying twice (these are the most censored contents) caused a vacuum in the public sphere. This is a space in which everyone holds the memory of Dr. Li by themselves, but they cannot communicate this part of memory with others. In other words, everyone has their own versions of the memory of Dr. Li but cannot exchange what they remember. The collective memory of *exactly* what happened to Li collapsed, to be replaced by the personal memories that cannot be spoken out in the social sphere. Without the support of repetition to sustain the memory of the incident, an ambiguity of memory is thus generated, and a grand forgetting befalls.

Furthermore, the grand narratives channel the collective memory of the lockdown in general towards a different direction, easily overlooking Li's case. In the vacuum created by censorship, the grand narratives endorsed by the authorities perform as the only actor. They infiltrate the memories of every individual and channel those memories towards a homogeneity with what is proposed by the grand narratives. The pungent memory of Dr. Li has been submerged quickly by the mantras sung for the great victory against the coronavirus. Besides the passive obliteration of such memories, the grand narratives also consume these memories in an active way. *Chinese Doctors* (2021), a film singing the mantras about the sacrifice of the medical workers who fought on the frontline in combatting the coronavirus, is a

good example. The characters in the film are all heroes. They represent all the medical workers, both dead and alive. Nevertheless, all their faces were erased from the screen. None of their features were represented in the film. Under the name of "Chinese doctors", all medical worker's specifics were reduced to and consumed as an empty symbol for the sake of the grand narratives. A hollow figure replaces the countenance of Li, and all his other specifics are exiled into corners of the society that few would re-remember them. In other words, under the pressure of the grand narratives, people are forgetting without a choice.

Therefore, with the joint effort of the vacuum, by censorship and the pressure from the grand narratives, the memory of Li finally becomes an ambiguous past. Everyone is sure there something tragic happened to him, yet the details are nowhere to be recalled. People soon find out that they are isolated by the severance of the metacommunication about Li, especially the comments below the post. The memory of Dr. Li, which should serve as one of the cornerstones uniting individuals against Covid-19 and the authority, fails to function in society (Qian 2021). Moreover, they are further alienated from other individuals, and no one heeds the call of communicating such memory. The failure of communication and the awareness that such communication will be censored leads to self-censorship in a "panopticon", in which "the crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities." (Foucault 1995: 201) In this case, there is no more real censorship deleting "deviant" comments every hour in the social sphere, but censorship in everyone who comments below, as conceptualized by Loury (1994) and Das and Kramer (2013). The supervision of censorship has been internalized and created a projection in every individual, modeling their behaviors. People start to censor themselves and become reluctant to remember. Therefore, the loneliness discussed in the previous section is haunted and amplified by the self-censorship before the cybernetic wailing wall, and the memory of Li falls into a mist of non-remembrance.

The active resemanticization of what happened to Dr. Li also makes the situation of the post different from the fate of the famous photo series, *The Tank Man* (1989)[9]. This is also censored massively on the Chinese internet. Unlike the Tiananmen Protest which *The Tank Man* depicts, the lockdown that Dr. Li refers to is still haunting the Chinese cities now. Whereas the

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[9] There are 6 original photos of the tank man taken by that time from different perspectives.

lockdown is still a perceived reality, it is impossible for the authority to re-move the text in society; it even needs him as one of the "Chinese Doctors" who sacrificed their lives for this great victory and resists slogans such as "Persistence Is Victory". In other words, the authority cannot remove the wailing wall in cyberspace for its own propaganda sake, whereas the Tian-anmen Protest, represented by *The Tank Man*, was defined as "the political unease between the spring and the summer in 1989"[10] (Translation mine). The Tiananmen Protest has nearly been removed from the living memories in China, and one cannot stop to ask a ghastly question: will the memories of Dr. Li be removed as lockdowns will finally be lifted, same as the Tian-anmen Protest? The answer is no, but only for now.

Mourning "one of us" in non-Remembrance

Before answering the last question proposed in the introduction and at the end of the last section, there is a need to profile the subject(s) of mourning, or, in the case of Dr. Li here, those who comment below his post. Even though every netizen, or Weibo user in our case, can see the post and comment on it, it is not proper to conclude that the two groups are the same. To mourn means to remember; those who come to mourn Li's tragic happenings and share their own sorrows must know at least some-thing about Li. They either witnessed the happenings or heard from others. In other words, they must retain memories of Dr. Li, despite the fact that their memories lack communication in the social sphere and they cannot create a memory in the collective sense. In this regard, when people gather under Dr. Li's post and comment to mourn their hero, they are also *trying* to remember him.

Collective mourning and remembering (memorializing) are habitually paralleled in most mourning studies for their similarity in reconstructing the past (e. g. Harju 2015; Nugent 2013; Mansfield and Trustram 2013). However, there is still a difference between collective remembering (Wertsch 2002) and collective mourning, even though the postures of mourning and remembering are identical. When we remember events which happened in the past, certain texts are retrieved to map out the happenings of the past and are ready for further communication in the social sphere. When peo-ple mourn, the details of the memory become secondary, and the primary factor is the affection of the loss which relates to every individual's cor-poreality. In an ideal state of mourning, the mourners should simultane-

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[10] For more details, please see the official account of the protest: http://www.gov.cn/test/2009-10/09/content_1434332.htm (in Chinese).

ously mourn for the loss and remember the happenings. Memories can be fogged while mourning keeps going on. The difference is well exemplified by a traditional profession in many ancient cultures: that of moirologist or professional mourner. They are paid to mourn the loss of someone, whom they do not remember because they do not have any relation to the bereft. In other words, they mourn and weep not because they hold grief for the loss, but only from their own affections. Therefore, collective mourning differs from collective remembering by the direction of the posture. It does not require an exact textual basis to construct the collective memory of a certain event because the action is not directed toward the memory texts. It is only a posture of remembering linked to an affective impact on every individual's side.

The ambiguity of collective memory demonstrates the difference between mourning and remembering more clearly. Those who cannot remember the details of the tragic happenings can still mourn the event. For example, although most contemporary Chinese people hold only vague memories of the massacre in Nanjing during World War II, they can still participate in mourning the loss of 300,000 lives during the massacre[11], especially when the National Memorial Day was established in 2014, a time when people go to the memorial site in the Nanjing city. In the same vein, the ambiguity caused by censorship in our case also creates the ambiance of mourning with the failure of remembering. In the same vein, the ambiguity of memory caused by censorship does not stop people from mourning in the comment area of Li's last post. People are still retaining the grief both from their own experiences with the spread of coronavirus in China and around the world, and the ambiguous memory enacted under the wailing wall in the cyberspace, although they cannot remember him fully and truthfully. In short, they mourn in non-remembrance.

More importantly, Li's post is a wailing wall in cyberspace. All the mourning practices regarding lockdown happen online. Online mourning is "beyond traditional temporal and social boundaries" (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013: 158). In an open online space, the remnants of the bereft are easily found, especially in the case of public figures. As T. Walter pointed out, in contrast to a mere tomb in a cemetery, online mourning manifests "the return of the community" (2015: 13). This indicates that personal griefs have the possibility of being recognized. In this regard, dis-

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[11] According to official statistics there were 300,000 people slaughtered during the two months after the Japanese troops seizing Nanjing. (http://www.19371213.com.cn/en/about/massacre/202007/t20200710_2236010.html).

enfranchised grief (Doka 1999), in which the grievers feel alone (Harju 2015), again claims its presence in the public space. By participating in the practice of mourning, people rediscover the community that they belong to by communicating the memory they share. Moreover, collective mourning, unlike collective remembering, is a self-oriented practice, which means that the sense of being collective does not *necessitate* the recognition of others. The empathy presumed by the mourners thus replaces loneliness in cyberspace. As Walter put it, "mourners are visible to all, and tolling bells heard by all" (2015: 14).

The restructuring of the social sphere in cyberspace has deeply affected the practice of mourning online. The exclusive relationship between respective commentators and Li constructs an extended affective space for individuals, as Zhou and Zhong (2021) noted, giving a place where social media rituals to take place. Burgess et al. conceptualized these social media rituals as "generic conventions and media practices [...] that accompany media events of particular types; including both celebrations and crises, both planned and unplanned." (2018: 229). The death of celebrities, in this regard, invokes a special kind of discourse, namely mourning in line with the preceding discourse that keeps the celebrity visible in the public sphere (Turner 2013: 9). These special discourses follow a ritualistic paradigm and are calibrated towards the mourned loss of the figure. Yet from another way round, the mediated death in the cyberspace weakens the power of the astounding fact of losing someone among us. The death of a public figure is not the bereavement of a significant other in our real life. By claiming their starry presence in the public sphere, their death can also be consumed, as the discourses before the death of the public figure (Turner 2013: 135–43; Harju 2015).

The case of Dr. Li is different. He was never a celebrity before his death, and he was a representative of the ordinary mass. He became well-known to the world only because he blew the whistle on the upcoming coronavirus outbreak at the beginning of 2020. There were no preceding social discourses about him, and all the discourses later are all about his death. The locus of the media ritual is not Dr. Li as a person in flesh and bones, but a name with several titles supported by contents (texts) at hand. Harju (2015: 124) noted that rather than being object-oriented in offline mourning, in which the mourned are always the bereft ones, online mourning is content-oriented. The case of Dr. Li is more extreme than other collective mourning practices online. Given the absence of preceding discourses to construct Dr. Li before his death means that mourning Li is not just content-oriented, but based on the contents thoroughly. Therefore, what Dr.

Li wrote has become the locus of all the mourning practices, while other matters not written there are forgotten. In the post, Li wrote that he was finally diagnosed as infected, but he failed to mention that he received admonition two months previously. This was easily forgotten under the hindrance of the grand narratives and the censorship. On the one hand, being content-oriented makes the name of Li more vulnerable to the consumptive intention. The film discussed above, *Chinese Doctors* (2021), is a good example here. On the other hand, there is never an exclusive fandom for him which means that anyone who holds such memories is welcomed to join the ritual. In this regard, the borders of the "imagined community" (Anderson 1991) become porous and new members are always being introduced to the mourning parade. This explains well why Li's last post maintains its presence in the public sphere and never falls into oblivion as time goes by. This is in contrast to the death of celebrities, which is quickly forgotten when the mass no longer consumes it.

The social media ritual is indeed not exempt from censorship. The memory texts that point to the actual focus of mourning cannot be spoken blatantly in the post's comment area. The aim of censorship, as discussed in the previous section, is meta-texts concerning the original texts in the social sphere. Therefore, the texts of mourning which refers to the individuals themselves as externalized grief, are not on the list for deletion. The self-censorship discussed in the previous section has emptied the contents of the comments regarding Dr. Li himself, but the blanks are soon refilled with people's own thoughts and emotions, accompanied by a posture to remember. In this regard, two basic coding rules can be identified in the comments:

First, the red line of censorship cannot be crossed. Once there are open remarks regarding the freedom of speech and the details of how Li was treated miserably by the police, they will be deleted, and the effort for building communications, both between the commentators and between them and Li, will be in vain, since the comments are there no more. In order to maintain the venue as a place for mourning, self-censorship must be applied in the comments to be communicated. Therefore, the post does not become a frontline in calling for a redressing of Dr. Li's reputation and for freedom of speech as *The Tank Man* did in Tiananmen Protest, but a place where ambiguous collective memories permeate. The comment area cannot serve as the ground for the formation of collective memories of Dr. Li.

Second, and more importantly, the things that cannot be spoken about due to censorship will be replaced by people's own stories and emotions, in the form of a dialogue between Li and the commentators. The need for a

thorough narrative requires the blanks in the collective memory to be filled with personal remembrance. Eco noted that the controllers of public communication channels "control only an empty form that each addressee will fill with the meanings provided by his own cultural models." (1998: 142) In the short-term memory, namely the communicative memory of the society (Welzer 2008), the blanks caused by the censorship will be filled by every individual's own experience by that time. In other words, when people try to recall an ambiguous memory, they will always use their own memory to compensate for the loss of the details, replacing "what happened to him" with "what happened to me".

Therefore, the real object of mourning is people's own experiences. What the commentators are mourning is their own grief and sorrow with empathy for Dr. Li. In this regard, mourning Dr. Li under the post is a compromise between the necessity of remembering Li and the pressure of censorship. However, this recession instead gives place for more creativity by welcoming more people to join the enterprise. It is not limited to those "insiders" of the story. With the possibility, or hope, of being seen by other commentators, the dialogues become bricks from the mass public to build the cybernetic wailing wall and keep the vitality of the post by adding their own narratives into the post. In this vein, the wailing wall in cyberspace becomes the anthology of people's experiences selected by people themselves. The only criterion is whether they think it proper to speak of it to a dead person they are trying to remember.

In sum, online mourning has become the substitution for collective remembering. It is precisely the unsatiated posture of remembering, suppressed by the censorship, that continues to make the activity of mourning happen once and again. This implicitly indicates the possibility of reconstructing the memories that the censorship has already dismissed. People will finally know what happened in this or that way, only if the mourning practice is there, reminding people that something happened before. In this regard, the ambiguity of memory instead creates the possibility of a remembrance. Commenting below the post, therefore, is not merely a fight against modern loneliness, but more practically, an unvoiced rebellion against censorship that is widely applied in China.

In the same vein, Dr Li's last post has been finally restructured from merely an index to what happened on him to a symbol that signify all the tragic happenings under the lockdown, which is not limited to spatial and temporal frames. The post is further freed from the topic of lockdowns towards a wailing wall which mirrors everyone's sadness, only if they remember in their hearts who Dr. Li is. In other words, the comments represent

both the remembering and the forgetting of Dr. Li. They are an ambiguous memory that only revokes the sorrows of every lonely soul. They also presuppose a possibility, a hope, of restoring the memory that one beholds both on him an on everyone that suffered from the lockdown. On the debris where the censorship alienates everyone, the tendril of remembrance persists as mourning, sustaining the vitality of memories of Li in everyone's own.

Conclusion: The History of Everyone

By July 8th, 2022, when this paper was being concluded, there were more than a hundred new comments in the comment area of Dr. Li's post, updating what happened during the day, varying from the assassination of Shinzo Abe, to falling in love with someone. The comment area has become a place where everyone can write down the history they see, demonstrating the vitality of the wailing wall. In the intertextual network of cyberspace, the wailing wall represents all the tragic happenings during the Wuhan lockdown, the first one because of the outbreak of Covid-19. More importantly, as a post on Weibo, it conforms with the modalities of the online platform, which welcomes everyone to participate in its progression when time moves forward. The active participation in building the wailing wall also distinguishes it from ordinary monuments, where silence prevails because of the weight of history they refer to (Kattago 2015). The comment area of Li's post, on the contrary, is a place chimed with mutterings of people's own experiences.

Loneliness in modern times is the basic logic for people to start to comment below the post. When most of the daily encounters become ghostly faces, there is a dire need for people to reconstruct themselves through communication. People need to reveal themselves and consolidate their own existence. Loneliness becomes protrusive under the context of lockdown, where physical contact is greatly restricted. The restriction, in this regard, tore off the last leaf of the shrinkage of the nearby and presented the loneliness clearly to everyone. Dr. Li's last post was precisely at the darkest times of the lockdown in Wuhan. What happened to Dr. Li became an explosion of all the negative feelings under the lockdown. His last post has thus become a place where people gather and find themselves among others regarding the same social reality in which Li was mistreated. By uniting under the call for rehabilitating Li's reputation, the loneliness of modern times is temporarily fended off when people reveal themselves and are recognized by others.

However, censorship hinders the communication process, reducing people to their modest shells. More importantly, deleting metatexts leads to self-censorship entrenching the loneliness that alienates everyone. People can no longer communicate their memories of Dr. Li, thus creating an ambiguity of the memories in themselves. In the panopticon, people start to revoke their own sorrows and memories and post them to the comment area, mourning the loss of Li instead of remembrance. The social media rituals are thus held to try to escape from the iron hands of censorship. However, the supervision of censorship is always there. The effort of remembering is never achieved, and the mourning practice remains in the comment area. In other words, it is exactly the pressure of censorship that consolidates the vitality of Dr. Li's post as a wailing wall in cyberspace. The post becomes not only a place for fighting against modern loneliness, but more of a place with silent flashes of human sympathy against the censorship that tries to implement its own narratives.

Burgess et al. (2018: 235) noted that social media rituals are a "history of me". As a wailing wall in cyberspace, it is built up by people themselves, free from the supervision of the grand narratives. Therefore, the monument is built from the bottom to the top with crystalized memories of everyone's own, brick by brick. More importantly, the monument itself bears features of "anti-monument" (Gibbons 2007: 94). It is freed from the symbolic burden of monumentality and becomes a presentation of everyone's own griefs and sorrows, thus continuing its progression towards the future. Without being a history modified by the grand narratives, the story of Li Wenliang becomes a history of people's own. It is a micro-history (Ginzburg 1993) belonging to everyone who experiences it, especially when the grand narratives shy away from giving an explanation, and do not give a final remark to set the coffin lid of the event. The memory of the Wuhan lockdown is no more vivid because of the pressure of the grand narratives. However, it seems that the wailing wall in cyberspace, namely Dr. Li's last post and the comments below, is the last stronghold.

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