

# Online Activism and Grassroots Memorialization in the Age of COVID-19: Dr. Li Wenliang's Virtual Wailing Wall

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## **Abstract:**

*This article uses Dr. Li Wenliang's virtual wailing wall as a case study to illustrate the continuities and transformations of online activism and grassroots memorialization during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Referencing diverse comments at the wall, online community, grassroots commemoration and online activism of the site are qualitatively analyzed. The article argues that the virtual wailing wall became a space for public contestation of official narratives, and thus illustrates the innovative agency of ordinary Chinese netizens. The study contributes to our understanding of the power of folklore in the face of crisis.*

*Keywords:* online activism, grassroots commemoration, online community, virtual wailing wall, mourning, grassroots agency, COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, and became a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO 2020). In this unprecedented time of crisis, ordinary people have produced and reproduced diverse expressive culture online and offline. Folklorists have played important roles in documenting, archiving, and analyzing these important cultural reproductions (Rouhier-Willoughby and Jurić 2021). Gegentuul Hongye Bai (2020) examines the recontextualization of traditional Mongolian verbal art *khuuriin ülger* ('fiddle story') by Mongolian folk singers in the context of the spread of COVID-19 in Inner Mongolia, China. He does so by illustrating how Mongols conveyed public health messages in fiddle stories, and how traditional verbal art has evolved in response to the pandemic. Tsafi Sebba-Elran (2021) studies how various COVID-19 memes have been produced and shared across online networks, and how these narratives help people foster solidarity and coping strategies with the new realities of living in during a pandemic. Reet Hiimäe, Mare Kalda, Kõiva Mare, and Piret Voolaid (2021) use a content analysis approach to study the function of COVID-19-related folklore collected in different genres and in wider transmedia and multimedia communicative processes from March to June 2020<sup>1</sup>. By giving examples of thematic religious lore, memes, and proverbs, they reveal the re-

cycling of known core motifs and texts commonly used as coping strategies, as well as the implications of such reinterpretations. Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby and Dorian Jurić (2021) edit the special issue “Vernacular Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic” to illustrate the power of folklore to provide solace and make sense of the world during the pandemic. The articles in this special issue present diverse genres of the folklore of the pandemic in Slavic traditions and in diaspora: material culture, narratives, songs, medical practices, and vernacular beliefs. Their goal is to analyze how people in Slavic countries experienced and responded to the pandemic from early March to the late summer of 2020. Moving from areas in Europe and Eurasia to the epicenter of the pandemic itself, this article uses Dr. Li Wenliang’s virtual wailing wall as a case study to examine the power of online mourning in China. The narratives presented at this virtual wailing wall were collected from March 13, 2020, to May 15, 2021. By analyzing common themes from the posts of ordinary people at the wall, we argue that the site became a space for public contestation of official narratives, and thus illustrates the innovative agency of ordinary Chinese people.

Dr. Li Wenliang was an ophthalmologist working in the Central Hospital of Wuhan before he gained global fame as the “whistleblower” of the COVID-19 pandemic (*New York Times* 8 Feb. 2020). On January 31, 2020, Dr. Li Wenliang posted on Weibo that he was one of the eight doctors admonished by the Chinese police on January 3 for spreading rumors regarding a new SARS virus.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, he was reprimanded for announcing in his classmate’s WeChat group that new SARS cases were found in the hospital he worked at on December 30, 2019. The Weibo post included a picture of the “xunjieshu” (disciplinary violation document) that he was asked to sign. This post garnered Li much attention, even while other “whistleblower” doctors remained unknown. The next day, Li posted again on Weibo, this time announcing that he had tested positive for COVID-19: “Today, the nucleic acid test results came back positive. The dust has settled, there is finally a diagnosis” (February 7, 2020). This was his last post in the group. On February 7, one week after sharing his governmental reprimand, Dr. Li Wenliang succumbed to the novel coronavirus. Tens of thousands of netizens immediately flooded the comment section of Li’s final post with messages of mourning and remembrance<sup>3</sup>. The scope of such comments quickly expanded from solely commemorative to personally demonstrative. Netizens from all over China left comments about their daily lives, recent news, personal tragedies, victories, hopes, and fears, all as if for Dr. Li himself to see. Within three months of Dr. Li’s death, over one million comments adorned the doctor’s last Weibo post. Up to today, the post was still being visited and commented on by netizens from all walks of life.

In early 2020, the term “wailing wall” (kuqiang) began to be used by Chinese netizens to refer to Dr. Li Wenliang’s final Weibo post. Users commented:

@Dramioneship: This is really the wailing wall of the Chinese internet. (April 28, 2020)

@Happ\*\*ym: Dr. Li Wenliang’s weibo is our wailing wall. (March 13, 2020)

@qiuse-wubian: This is not the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, but it has the same sadness,

just because there is too much sorrow in silence... (April 27, 2020)

This article discusses how the social and psychological functions of Dr. Li Wenliang's final Weibo post engender the new, recontextualized notion of a virtual wailing wall. Namely, and in ways not dissimilar from the original Jewish site, the post lies at the center of a wide community of people and serves as a venue for grassroots memorialization.<sup>4</sup> This memorialization itself, however, was broadly inclusive, as evidenced by the dissensus regarding Dr. Li's status as a hero or deity. Further, the deliberation that took place at the post, by virtue of its non-correspondence with official government narratives, has also granted the wall an activist quality. The post became a haven for Chinese netizens to express their hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic - tragedies otherwise obfuscated by governmental narratives of a swift victory. Decisively, the community itself formed around and celebrated an individual originally admonished by the government. In this way, the post has transcended the concise category of a spontaneous shrine (Grider 2007) and truly become China's virtual wailing wall.

This article responds to and expands upon several scholarly debates surrounding online activism, grassroots memorialization, and internet culture. Existing scholarship on grassroots memorialization involves responses to tragedies (Grider 2007; Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011) and remembrances of individuals near mourners (Dobler 2009). Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sanchez-Carretero conceptualize grassroots memorials as involving "the creation of memorial bricolages and makeshift memorials in public space in order to achieve change" (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 2). However, the nature of such commemorative change, especially as it manifests in online activism against government narratives, is not fully explored. On the other hand, recent scholarship surrounding online activism in China centers largely around instances of organized resistance against governmental projects (Liu 2013) and the general lack of contentious agency afforded by President Xi Jinping's consolidated internet system (Creemers 2018). This study resists such conclusions by framing the folk memorialization of Dr. Li Wenliang as meaningful online activism that successfully challenged the official Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s narratives. In his book *The Power of the Internet in China*, Yang Guobin asserts that "state power channels online activism into some issues but not others...issues that are more politically tolerable and more resonant with the public are more likely to enter the public sphere and become contentious events" (Yang 2009, 13). Moreover, the state control of the internet furnishes the creativity of the Internet users and activists - rendering them "skilled actors" and not "captive audiences" (Yang 2009, 13). In other words, Yang argued that political control shapes the forms of online activism but cannot forbid it from occurring. Furthermore, both power and online activism change as they continuously interact with each other. Yang Guobin emphasizes this interaction and argues that "both the forms and practices of state power and online activism have become more sophisticated over time" (2009, 13). The COVID-19 pandemic presents new contexts in which the interactions between power and activism in China must be examined. During the pandemic, online activity has been tightly censored and constrained by

the CCP's strict limits on dissent and activism. Activist postings, accounts, and chat groups on social media sites continue to be frequently shut down. However, ordinary people still find creative ways to express their feelings and opinions online, and authorities can no longer afford to completely ignore their voices. At Dr. Li Wenliang's virtual wall, Chinese netizens come forward to share their experiences, emotions, and voices, and advocate for social justice in their own ways.

## **Methodology**

In this section, we introduce our research methodology in terms of data collection and content analysis. This study consists of manually collected comments under Doctor Li Wenliang's final Weibo post. The data were qualitatively analyzed using the coding software Nvivo 12<sup>5</sup>. In total, we collected 25,654 unique comments from Li Wenling's Weibo post. Our method involved manually copying the most recent Weibo comments on Dr. Li's post. This method allowed us to collect written text from public comments visible to all Weibo users. All data were collected between March 13, 2020, and May 15, 2021. Due to the high volume of comments and the restrictions of human ability, we were not able to collect all the comments from our entire time range of study. For the large-scale data collection, we collected main comments on 3/13/2020, 4/27/2020-4/29/2020, 4/30/-5/4/2020, 6/20/2020, 6/25/2020-6/27/2020, 7/18/2020, 1/23/2021-1/26/2021, and 1/30/2021. During other times, we used random sampling to collect data every one or two weeks.

The emergent theme method was employed at the early stages of the coding to identify preliminary patterns. After we identified important themes, we conducted a literature review to support our findings. The data analysis software Nvivo 12 was used to organize and code the responses after all the data was collected using both methods. Nvivo allows for the quick identification and organization of specific themes and keywords within large bodies of texts. Considering copyright and privacy issues, we elected to use the pinyin of usernames.<sup>6</sup>

## **Online Community: The Virtual**

In this section outlines the breadth of topics discussed under Dr. Li's post, and the interpersonal, conversational nature of many users' updates to the late doctor. Next, the comment section is analyzed as a supportive community that allows for vulnerability and the sharing of otherwise-taboo emotions - considering the cultural term "tree hole." It concludes with a discussion of the familial, post-cultural environment engendered by the post. These considerations demonstrate the depth and unity of the online community that arose at the extra-institutional site of Dr. Li's wailing wall.

Online communities as vulnerable spaces have been studied extensively by scholars. They form largely via interest forums that unite people with similar passions or backgrounds in specific online venues for the discussion and sharing of different topics. Personal loneliness stemming from geographic limitations, physical disabilities, age, or social restrictions can be mitigated through participation in such like-minded forums. These spaces engender a sense of belongingness that, according to Dr. Yang

Guobin, allows them to be seen as “home” or “family” (Yang 2009, 180). This notion of family is evident in Dr. Li’s post, as a diverse array of netizens assemble each day to mourn together, share in their daily mundanities, and support one another - even referring to Dr. Li using familiar terms such as “Brother Li” or “Uncle Li.”

Every day, netizens from all over China visit Dr. Li Wenliang’s final post to leave comments about their daily lives. Such comments range anywhere from the simple sharing of a homecooked meal to the lamenting of a lost job. Responders occupy a wide range of age groups and social positions, as evidenced by the comments’ thematic diversity. For example, test-taking was mentioned over 150 times in our data; with users leaving comments such as “I am about to take the final exam, I hope I get a good grade.” Discussion of “older” topics such as marriage and employment appear with similar frequency. One user updated Dr. Li Wenliang: “Doctor Li, I am getting married, I’m nervous and excited!” A wide breadth of occupational backgrounds are also represented in the comments of such working-age netizens. For instance, “Being a head teacher is so stressful,” and “[My store on] Taobao has been out of business for 3 days.” These examples demonstrate the great diversity of backgrounds and positionalities united through the wailing wall. As one user commented:

@Alice2590: This place is a miniature of society. There are children who come in with childish, old people who have experienced the vicissitudes of life, teachers who watch the world from a three-foot podium, debaters who use the law as the boundary, and unemployed who are struggling to make a living on the edge of life, as well as smug students, ignorant young men, and young girls who have a love for the first time... They are all shocked by this pure land of soul. (June 3, 2020)

In addition to the sharing of personal anecdotes and life events, commenters filled Dr. Li in about current events around the world. One user updated Dr. Li about the Sino-Indian conflict: “there is another dispute over the border between China and India, I heard that people died!” (17 Jun. 2020). Another netizen informed Dr. Li that “Trump has been infected [with COVID-19]” (October 2-5, 2020). Even the weather was discussed: “Dr. Li, the northeast was still 30 degrees yesterday, and today there is another cold front warning” (May 3, 2020). No amount of information was too trivial to share with the doctor. Others visited the post just to greet Dr. Li - commenting a simple “good morning” or “good night.” It is evident that many users viewed their responses as actual conversations with Dr. Li, not just comments on an unchanging post. For example, one netizen prefaced their message with “Good evening Dr. Li, I haven’t come to chat with you for two days.” Thus, Dr. Li’s wailing wall was not only frequented by netizens from all walks of life, but many of such users participated in similarly interpersonal engagements with Dr. Li Wenliang.

The common desires of netizens to continue interacting with Dr. Li furnished a supportive community. In addition to sending their best wishes to the late doctor, commenters supported and encouraged one another - developing a safe space for vulnerability and openness. As one user put it: “come here to talk if you are happy or unhappy.” Another commenter described their gratitude for the kindness of the com-

munity: “Last night I didn’t sleep and cried most of the night, but these wonderful people came to enlighten and encourage me. [...] Thank you, you kind and wonderful people, wish you all a happy day everyday!” These comments, along with hundreds of others involving hope and encouragement, reveal the distinct, mutually supportive, and reassuring community that has arisen from the common usage of the post.

The supportiveness of this online community is further evidenced by the sharing of deeply personal and emotional experiences. Many users commented about negative feelings that may not have otherwise been volunteered in everyday life. In particular, many netizens offered their feelings of loneliness and depression to Dr. Li Wenliang, sometimes out of fear of bothering others or uncertainty that anyone else would care. For example, one user commented: “Dr. Li, the pressures of work and life have recently been very great. I really want to find someone to chat with, but I am afraid that others will worry” (April 29, 2020). The laments of other users were even direr: “the desire to commit suicide is getting stronger and stronger these days” (May 28, 2020). In fact, over 2000 posts in our data contained keywords indicating negative feelings, including “tired”, “want to cry”, “sad”, “depression”, and “broken”. The ability for ordinary people to express negative emotions has been stifled by both pre-existing cultural values and the isolating consequences of COVID-19, even as such feelings have been markedly exacerbated by the pandemic. Dr. Li’s wailing wall provides a space for the unprecedented vulnerability needed in these times. In this way, the wall can also be understood as a “tree hole” - a space for sharing secrets safely without fear of social consequence or backlash.<sup>7</sup> The term has been used to describe online spaces before and appears frequently in our data. For example: “It is nice to see that today people are using this place as a tree hole to talk about their lives. Modern people are under a great deal of pressure and are doing their best to survive. To have this tree hole is a great relief” (@happinesshuangzhao1988, May 2, 2020). Hence, Dr. Li’s wailing wall became a space wherein individuals could expect both support and confidentiality when sharing even the most traditionally shunned emotions.

Chinese netizens visit Dr. Li’s wailing wall in different times, places, and circumstances. Some visit Dr. Li’s Weibo once a day as a kind of daily pilgrimage, some visit it routinely, and some visit it once a while. Some came to commemorate Dr. Li Wenliang, and more people came to share their personal feelings that would not be shared in other ways. The following comments illustrate how Chinese netizens came to visit this Dr. Li’s wailing wall and how they have formed their own online communities:

@niuwuniu wusantiantian: There is a reply almost every minute, which has been going on for almost a year. Strangers from different places and fields expressed their memorialization for Dr. Li under this post. But more people came to share their own joy, anger, sorrow and happiness, and trivial things in their lives. It seems to have become a place of spiritual comfort. Among the vast sea of people, thousands of miles, there is a place for a country and a home, but there is no place for a tired soul. Hello, strangers! Hello, my love! (January 9-17, 2021)

@tangtant yao nuli xuexi: It’s been almost a year, and I’ve left dozens of messages

here, running through the whole year ... Life is slowly getting better, but my mother is trapped in Hebei. I am missing her and worried about her. (January 9-17, 2021)

@-langzi16602: Hello, Dr. Li. It's been a few months. I ran under your Weibo to chat with you again. Pour a cup of tea and light a cigarette. I don't know if you smoke or not. The Spring Festival is coming for 2021. As a migrant worker, I have an 81-year-old mother and a pair of children. My mother and children have suffered a lot because of my divorce, but the pandemic is coming back, and I don't know if I could go home, and if the accuracy of nucleic acid detection is high. It's too hard to miss my loved ones without going home. (January 9-17, 2021)

@mojituo meiyou langmu: Dr. Li, I don't know why, when I watch your iron fans leave messages for you, my eyes are filled with tears. It is your positivity, courage and professional ethics that bring us together. Whenever there is a lot of unhappiness in life, I like to visit here. You didn't want to be a hero, but you became our hero. (May 10-15, 2021)

@qianbo yu shenchen: Dr. Li, I left a comment here between 7pm and 8pm last night, people "like" it constantly until noon today. This shows that many netizens are carefully reading all the comments under your last Weibo post, and listening attentively to the sighs of strangers left here. Probably, we could not be cured or healed here, but at least we would not be abused or attacked. These similar people make me both moved and sad. (May 10-15, 2021)

Dr. Li Wenliang's virtual wailing wall provides a place of "spiritual comfort", a place to shelter "tired souls". Chinese netizens come to visit here and leave messages when they encounter various challenges, difficulties, and traumas in their lives. They do not feel alone when they visit here, and support from kind strangers makes them feel touched. Like one commenter emphasized above, it is Dr. Li Wenliang's "positivity, courage and professional ethics" that bring everyone together in this virtual space, and the mourning has its own power.

### **Mourning and Memorialization: The Wailing**

Memory is one of the most common themes visible among the comments under Dr. Li Wenliang's final Weibo post. In our data alone, the words "commemoration", "missing", and "remember" were mentioned over 300 times. For instance, one user imparted upon the late doctor: "I will miss you forever, you will always live in our hearts". Commemorative comments occurred in a wide variety of forms, including reassurances of Dr. Li's remembrance, updates on the mark he left on the world, and even religious memorialization and prayers. Dr. Li became a deity and a hero because of many of the comments, but such valorization was simultaneously contested in favor of his ordinariness. We argue that beyond the establishment of a diverse yet mutually supportive community, Dr. Li's virtual wailing wall continues to serve as a spontaneous shrine for inclusive grassroots memorialization. However, the wall itself is not limited by the "community standards and mores" that offline shrines normally con-

form to, and allows everyone to participate—regardless of positionality, proximity to the mourned, or personal mourning beliefs (Grider 2007, 7).

This section begins with a discussion of online memorialization with reference to Robert Dobler's scholarship on Myspace mourning. It specifically focuses on the notion of continued engagement about everyday life as a means of keeping Dr. Li's memory alive. Next, this notion is situated within the context of Chinese cultural and religious mourning beliefs and discussed alongside other instances of Chinese religious memorialization at the virtual wailing wall. These considerations serve to demonstrate how preexisting cultures of memorialization are reflected at the wall, and contribute to the deification of Dr. Li. Finally, Dr. Li is analyzed as a folk hero. A dichotomy between martyrization and the remembrance of an ordinary man exists among the comments - evidencing the commemorative diversity of the space. This discussion illustrates the inclusive grassroots memorial at the center of the wailing wall's online community.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced society to digitize to an unforeseen extent. This fundamental shift to the online sphere, coupled with the deadliness of the disease, forced citizens to find creative ways to mourn the deceased using social media. Robert Dobler (2009) summarizes several notable patterns of online memorialization practiced on social media, and a major theme that he discusses is the ability of users to let the online pages of the deceased "live on" through continued memorialization and updates about daily life (185). The directly commemorative and personally informative comments serve to keep the spirit of Dr. Li Wenliang alive when understood through this framework. This notion was echoed in a famous Chinese quote that one user shared: "he is gone, but he is still alive." Another user commented that "life is short, but the internet is practically permanent! Dr. Li Wenliang is gone, but Dr. Li in the internet space is still alive." The online community that gathered at Dr. Li's wailing wall strove to keep his memory alive both through memorialization of the doctor's actions themselves, but also through their continued engagement with the space in a multitude of personal ways. Some did this through sharing updates about their daily lives to the late doctor. Many of such comments mentioned missing the doctor, but a great deal of others centered exclusively around happenings of their daily lives. For example, one commenter said they thought of Dr. Li when doing schoolwork: "Good morning Dr. Li, today, the teacher asked me to write a paper about the epidemic. When I wrote about the hero, I couldn't help thinking of you. However, the words are always pale, and no matter how we appraise you, you could not come back. Our school is about to start, which means that everything is slowly returning to normal." (@Xiudejiebanrenfront, April 29, 2020). As Dobler discussed, the constant updating of a deceased person's post helps mitigate this fear of losing memory, even if such updates consist simply of tidbits about daily life. One user shared this sentiment: "Check in every day not out of fear of death, but out of fear that people will forget you."

Dobler's scholarship regarding the immortalizing function of online mourning can be nicely situated into the contexts of Chinese culture to understand the wailing wall as a site for grassroots memorialization. There exists a notion within Chinese traditional belief that the spirits of the deceased may still live with the living and can be interacted with for both protective and commemorative purposes (Sterckx 2004). This



belief is reflected at the wall, as netizens clearly maintained that their messages to Dr. Li were visible to his spirit. For instance, “Dr. Li: If your spirit has sense, your Weibo is still alive and everyone often visits it and shares thoughts. I think you will be gratified. You cared about everyone’s safety during your lifetime, and your spirit should be the same. Bless China, and freedom belongs to the people!” (@zyjxuezuozhenren, May 4, 2020).

If not directly acknowledging Dr. Li’s ongoing presence at the wall itself, many comments wished the doctor’s spirit a safe and happy residency in heaven: “I hope you are happy in heaven”. Chinese Buddhist notions of reincarnation were also manifest among the comments. For instance, users frequently wished Dr. Li a good next life: “May you have a splendid time in the next life.” Some wishes were out of anger or hopelessness about current states of affairs: “All popular comments have been deleted. We don’t expect anymore. May Dr. Li escape from this bottomless place in your next life” (June 20, 2020). Others simply urged him to lead an ordinary next life: “Don’t be a doctor in the next life, spend a good life with your wife and children;” and “In the next life, please don’t be a hero anymore. Please be an ordinary person and have a happy life.”

It is evident that many commenters believed that the deceased came to visit their loved ones one last time before reincarnation on the 49th day after death in accordance with Chinese Han Buddhist tradition. On the 49th day after Dr Li’s passing (March 27, 2020), one user inquired: “Today is your seven-seven [49 days after death]. Elders once said that those who died will visit the world for the last time on this day! Will you go home to see your wife, parents, and children? Will you go to the hospital to see your colleagues? Will you see the suffering of all of us?” Another netizen simply wished: “It is your seven-seven, I come to see you”. Finally, as articulated by one user, Dr. Li became a deity himself, making him a viable recipient for digital prayers: “You have become a deity in heaven, and I hope you will bless my heart to be strong, open-minded, and cheerful, so that I can live a healthy, kind-hearted, and striving life”. Users visited the wall to pray for a wide range of blessings, including everything from good health, sleep, and test scores to the protection of activists:

@ariel-1007: Dr. Li, bless my mother’s health (April 28, 2020)

@YY--xx: Little Liangliang, bless me to have a good night’s sleep. I suffered from insomnia last night. (June 26, 2020)

@citouliezuanGary: Brother Liang, I finally got all the answers right while reading English today. As a heavenly deity, please bless me such that I will be successfully admitted to graduate school next year and become a great doctor like you. (April 28, 2020)

@wangjinidemingzishinuanfeng: Good morning. Seeing the extreme left comments under Fang Fang’s diary<sup>8</sup> makes it hard to imagine how much stress she is under! I hope that Dr. Li can protect her and all those who are being harmed for telling the truth (March 30, 2020)

Such prayers still constitute memorialization but possess the added function of canonizing Dr. Li as a deity capable of receiving and fulfilling prayers. Direct engagements with Dr. Li can therefore be understood not just as common trends of online mourning, but also as the products of preexisting cultural beliefs.

The post was also a site for the distinguishment of Dr. Li as a hero. Within our data alone, over two hundred and eighty commenters directly addressed Dr. Li as a hero. From referring to Li as a “true hero of the people” to “paying respects to the hero” to simply “thanking the hero”, it is apparent that many netizens used the wailing wall as a venue to heroize the late doctor. Dr. Li Wenliang was not only remembered as a hero because he spoke out in an unforeseen manner or defied the government to a great extent, but also because he embodied the honest hardships and conditions of the average Chinese citizen. As evident in the comment, “[You are an] ordinary hero, making us feel more real and respectful.” However, the valorization of Dr. Li as an extraordinary person was not unanimous. Many users rejected the commemoration of Dr. Li Wenliang as an extraordinary hero. As one commenter put it: “I don’t understand why an ordinary person has been made a hero, I hope he remains ordinary.” Another commenter shared: “We don’t want any heroes, we just hope that everyone can live happily.”

It is evident that people want Dr. Li to remain ordinary because his ordinariness allowed for a sense of relatability that spoke to many netizens. His signing of the police-issued letter of reprimand indicated an acknowledgment of his accused wrongdoing, as well as an ordinary level of reluctance to stand out to tell the truth. The honor of ordinariness was mentioned frequently throughout the comments:

@memechaAurora: Why do we miss Li Wenliang? It’s not because of how great a sacrifice he has made and how extraordinary a hero he is, but because [we] see ourselves from him. He is optimistic in life, loves to play and to eat, and has bad moods sometimes. He is just an ordinary person like us. He is us, and we are him. We desire to live freely in our hearts, to tell the truth, to not lie, and we don’t want to pretend for the sake of the world. We all believe that kind people should have happy endings. (March 17, 2020)

On the other hand, the official narrative of Dr. Li’s heroism distanced him from the relatable “brother Li,” which might be one reason why some people refused to call him a hero. This is reflected in the following comments:

@qianyinying: Dr. Li, you have left us for 3 months now, and I am afraid that you are getting further and further away from us. You are not a hero but a family in our hearts. I feel deeply sorry that you were admonished that night, and that you were under great pressure when CCTV broadcast that you and others spread rumors. (May 7, 2020)

@xiuliguizhong: My elder brother, as I expected, the official media took the opportunity to promote you as another image. Alas, there are still very few people who can always think independently. If you see these things over there, don’t be angry and

sad. Although individuals are always pawns of the country, we are just fine to live as ourselves. You are a good man, a good doctor, a good husband, a good son and a good citizen. I know. (April 8, 2020)

Another reason that netizens refuse to call Dr. Li a hero is that they would rather him be alive and ordinary than dead and a hero. As one commenter said, “Everyone says you are a hero. I don’t want to call you a hero because compared to being a hero, I feel better if you are alive!”

The wailing that took place at Dr. Li’s virtual wailing wall was deeply personal and diverse in both form and recipient. In fact, Dr. Li was not the only person mourned at the wall. In the times of unprecedented disconnection and loss that the COVID-19 pandemic prompted, the wall provided an inclusive space for netizens to candidly commemorate loved ones, friends, teachers, and even strangers:

@monishuizu: Dad, it’s May 1st. If you had persisted for another month, I could have returned to see you, but unfortunately you passed in April. The virus made it so the last time I saw you was January, and now we can’t see you again. I am now going back to Tianjin, but you are gone... (April 30, 2020)

@bigengling: It is my first time to see your Weibo today. I feel as if there is a bone in my throat, and I hold tears in my eyes. My ninth-grade teacher Feng Hao died of pancreatic cancer. This year marks 20 years since graduation from junior high school, but we heard the news during the pandemic. He died in a hospital in Guangzhou, instead of my Hubei hometown. Time flies so fast! I am sad, sad memory is blurred, sad my life is not as happy as before, sad the year of self-reliance has past... (March 23, 2020)

@yingguoqianyan: I hope that a monument can be set up to the medical staffs who died on the job from the new coronavirus. Let us remember, let our children and grandchildren remember the heroes of our time, the true warriors. (April 29, 2020)

These examples demonstrate how the wall is not a just shrine to a single person based on a single commemorative intention. Rather, Dr. Li’s final Weibo post has become a multifunctional monument to the diverse sufferings brought about by the pandemic onto people of all walks of life. In this way, the post transcends the single-subject nature of offline spontaneous shrines - becoming a memorial for the act of wailing itself.

The memorialization that took place at Dr. Li’s wailing wall can additionally be understood in terms of activism and protest, rendering the site itself grassroots memorialization. Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero define “grassroots memorialization” as “the process by which groups of people, imagined communities, or specific individuals bring grievances into action by creating an improvised and temporary memorial with the aim of changing or ameliorating a particular situation” (2011, 2). The Weibo post provided an unofficial, spontaneous space for some netizens to creatively share their dissatisfaction with the governmental handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The positive commemoration of Dr. Li itself defies the condemnatory “whistleblower” narratives originally pushed by the CCP, illustrating the wall’s status

as grassroots memorialization. In the following section, the means in which netizens used the wall to contest government narratives, assert agency, and engage in what Xu Bin termed “activist remembering” are analyzed (2020, 148). This discussion serves to respond to the broader debate regarding the existence and characteristics of freedom of speech in contemporary China.

### **Online Activism and Freedom of Speech: The Wall**

Dr. Li Wenliang’s virtual wailing wall serves as an unofficial space that allows internet users to contest official narratives and spontaneously deliberate about topics. Thus, the wall illustrates the freedom of speech enjoyed by Chinese netizens during the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The existence and nature of democracy and freedom of speech in China are topics widely debated by scholars. Some maintain that China’s system can be understood as a deliberative democracy (or a precursor thereof) (Zhou 2012; He 2014; Leib 2005), whereas others hold that any form of democracy or freedom of speech is absent in or incompatible with the Chinese system (Kristin Longanecker 2009; Chen and Zhang 2011). At the same time, some scholars argue that the internet has engendered new mediums for protest and activism in China (Li 2013; Yang 2009), whereas others understand it as an extension of preexisting control apparatuses that does not grant any more agency (Creemers 2017). Regardless of the outcome, it is important to decolonize the concept of freedom of speech, and in doing so, divorce it from Western notions of liberal democracy. Western political categories cannot always be neatly applied to Chinese contexts and should not be treated as focal points for analysis thereof. In fact, a 2018 study showed that most citizens were satisfied with the level of democracy in China, despite such a perspective being “not necessarily consistent with political scientists’ perspective on liberal democracy” (Zhai 2018, 247). This phenomenon reflects the plurality of understandings of democracy and freedom of speech that inform our analysis of Dr. Li’s virtual wailing wall as an activist space. To situate the wall within historical contexts, this section begins with an overview of popular protest in contemporary China. Referencing a study by Xu Bin (2008), we argue that a key technique of activism in contemporary China involves the outright or subtle contestation of official narratives.

Before analyzing the virtual wailing wall’s role as a site for online activism and popular contention, the historical contexts of democracy and freedom of speech protests in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), both online and offline, will be considered. The contemporary history of pro-democracy protests in the PRC can be traced back to the 1979 Democracy Wall movement. The wall, located in central Beijing’s busy Xidan street, originated as a “mundane bulletin board” that, after gradual growth in popularity, became a “popular venue for people to meet and discuss ideas” (Wei 1999). Many of the opinions shared at the wall were cautiously correspondent with government narratives, but more critical viewpoints arose after activist Wei Jingsheng’s posting of “The Fifth Modernization”. This manifesto, shared in response to Deng Xiaoping’s Four Modernizations development campaign, argued that democracy should be included in China’s recent reforms. According to Wei Jingsheng, the

essays posted in response and agreement to “The Fifth Modernization” constituted “the first time anyone had acknowledged China’s human rights problems in such a public atmosphere” (Wei 1999). Despite the subsequent imprisonment of Wei Jingsheng and other Democracy Wall activists, their emancipatory sentiments were reflected 10 years later in the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement. The seven-week-long protests were highly varied in both purpose and governmental handling thereof, but ultimately emerged in response to the death of former CCP general secretary Hu Yaobang. Secretary Hu had been a favorite among students and intellectuals alike, as his relatively lenient attitudes towards previous movements demonstrated validation of the pro-democracy cause. For this very reason, however, Hu became an enemy of Maoist hardliners - and was consequently removed from his position. The initial marches on Tiananmen, therefore, called for an official reevaluation of Hu Yaobang in addition to greater freedoms of speech and expression (Zhao 2001, 148). The movement soon developed into a broad campaign for democracy and transparency that, like the Democracy Wall event a decade prior, was decisively snuffed out by the government. Although the economy was liberalized in the late 1970s, the government’s responses to democracy and freedom of speech movements indicated that such changes would not manifest in the realm of politics.

The advent of the internet has posed new challenges to pro-democracy activists and the central government alike. China’s online landscape has shifted from its relatively relaxed and fragmented stages under President Hu Jintao to a highly regulated space under President Xi Jinping. After the internet was identified by senior officials of CCP as an ideological liability that could allow “mistaken thinking trends” to enter Chinese public consciousness, tighter institutional regulations on the online sharing of information were implemented (Creemers 2017, 92). China’s new cybergovernance, including real-name registration laws, has engendered what Manuel DeLanda has termed a “panspectric” mode of surveillance that relies on a “multiplicity of sensors deployed around all bodies” (Creemers 2017, 92). This strengthening of internet restrictions has made it difficult for activists to spontaneously organize and share information. At the same time, Xi Jinping’s administration has seen a suppression of grassroots, non-governmental channels for voicing dissent (Fu and Distelhorst 2018, 100). During the COVID-19 pandemic, and even in direct response to the death of Dr. Li Wenliang, CCP censors worked hard to eliminate competing narratives and enforce CCP’s consensus (Raymond 2020). In fact, any discussion of Dr. Li Wenliang’s passing was initially suppressed and often altogether removed from news outlets and social media. On June 10, 2021, China’s Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress passed a new Data Security Law that centralized data processing and storage (Sheng 2021). This indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a further heightening of restrictions for unilateral control of public discourse to be maintained by the government. This took place in a society that, as discussed above, was already experiencing tightening regulations on free expression both online and offline.

Chinese activists continue to candidly challenge governmental narratives despite tightened regulation or increased punishment. Xu Bin (2017) analyzed one instance of such activism: the remembering of the children who died in poorly constructed

schools during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. The inability for the government to take responsibility for the collapse of thousands of such schools, as well as the official “covert silence” set up to obfuscate the resultant deaths, provoked individuals including Ai Weiwei, Tan Zuoren, Huang Qi, and Liu Shaokun to engage in contestatory activism (Xu 2017, 149). This activism itself consisted largely of collecting and disseminating the names of deceased children - information obscured by official narratives of positivity and reconstruction. This movement was not practical in prompting immediate institutional changes, but such was not the goal of the activists. Rather, the “tiny public” of dissidents sought to “commemorate the deceased, enhance public awareness of the issue, and challenge the state’s moral authority” (Xu 2017, 182). This expressive activism is reflected in online activism in China, and particularly at Dr. Li Wenliang’s virtual wailing wall. However, the wall’s activism did not solely involve a tiny public of activists or a regionally specific event, but a diverse online community of ordinary people all experiencing the same global tragedy: the COVID-19 pandemic. Netizens found ways to react in creative and expressive forms, expand upon, and challenge government narratives and tightening restrictions - evidencing Yang Guobin’s observation that “power shapes contention” (2009, 13). The next two sections will explore how the folk memorialization that the community engaged in challenged the initial governmental admonishment of Dr. Li Wenliang, and how the virtual wailing wall’s online community defied official “victory” narratives. Thus, the wall is justified as a multifunctional activist space that, by mere existence alone, evidences the expressive agency asserted by Chinese netizens.

### **Contesting the “Rumor-Spreader” Narratives**

The memorialization of Li Wenliang that took place at the virtual wailing wall can be understood as dissentive activism, as it directly challenged the doctor’s initial admonishment by the government. Evidence of the CCP’s official narrative about Dr. Li Wenliang can be traced back to his police-issued letter of reprimand (*xunjieshu*) for being a “rumor-spreader”. As discussed previously, Dr. Li posted a screenshot of the letter on Weibo. Netizens widely criticized this admonishment on the wailing wall: “We know they are lying,” “Always remember this shameless and dirty admonishment they issued.” One commenter expresses the regret that this pandemic might have been avoided, “if at that time you had not been admonished or suppressed to report the news, would all this not have happened? (@luvi4evrtig, March 20, 2020).”

Furthermore, as described in the folk memorialization section, Dr. Li was remembered as a hero, a friend to the people, and even a deity. Netizens also commemorated the doctor’s outspokenness, portraying him as a symbol for moral integrity and the speaking of truth to power despite potential consequences, which directly controls the official “rumor-spreader” narrative. As they comment:

@qingliangyixia369: When the pandemic came, Dr. Li was the first to tell the truth, but was admonished as a criminal, died of the pandemic, and was finally martyred. Thus, he was remembered as the first whistleblower of this century’s pandemic. (April 25,

2020)

@shiqizhongwuqi: You are our beacon light. I wish I could speak out the truth at the special times in the future. (March 14, 2020)

In this case, the admonishment issued by the government has ironically turned into a medal for Dr. Li's bravery, as netizens commented "The admonition book is your epitaph! Your pride!"

This overwhelming outpouring of support towards an initially sanctioned individual forced the government to both revoke the admonishment of Dr. Li and push to further change the system beyond a simple investigation:

@zhongdayangbanxiannv: Today's survey results came out, as we expected, it doesn't hurt or itch, and it avoids the serious and only speaks the light. The investigation report, which was supposed to be more reflective and accusatory, became a notice to fool the people. (March 20, 2020)

@shantiekechi: Dr. Li Wenliang's tragedy is not someone's mistake, but a systematic mistake. Not investigating systemic problems, or just blaming the local police station on the spot, would mean there will be no accountability and such mistakes will happen again. And next time, it will still be the people who suffer. (March 20, 2020)

@zhiyuboyou8914: I heard about the results of Mr. Li's investigation. The admonishment was revoked, and related police officers were punished. Are you satisfied with this result? I think these are not important. The important thing is that this society should have more than one voice. If this doesn't change at all, it is useless to punish more people. Did you feel the same when being admonished? (March 20, 2020)

### **Contesting the Official Victory Narratives**

The official narratives disseminated by the Chinese government regarding the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic told a tale of resilience and victory. The CCP white paper entitled "Fighting Covid-19: China in Action" was published on June 7, 2020, and portrayed the events of the COVID-19 pandemic as an "all-out people's war on the virus" (CSCIO 2020). Further, this "war" was frequently described as being swiftly won by the people: "in approximately three months, a decisive victory was secured in the battle to defend Hubei Province and its capital city of Wuhan" (CSCIO 2020). The broad victory narratives did not sufficiently represent the ongoing, everyday hardships of the Chinese people, as previously evidenced in the online community section. Thus, many netizens at the wailing wall were unsatisfied with the characterization of the pandemic as a decisive victory, often remembering it instead as a tragedy:

@yangguangjingzhongyu: Wuhan is unblocked, and the people of Wuhan gain victory. The hymns of praise became louder and louder, but the accountability and reflection were nowhere in sight...(April 8, 2020)

@yidiandianqi: I feel so guilty. [Virus in] the country is almost cleared. I am very hap-

py. I even forget how tragic, angry, and powerless as an ordinary person I used to feel. I am just immersed in a narrative of pride and vanity. Dr. Li, I hope you will keep reminding us... only if you speak, will this society be better. (March 14, 2020)

@fengwohaodeaizi: Doctor Li, although the epidemic is under control, it is definitely not a victory! In a system where people will be admonished to tell the truth, there will never be a real victory! (March 22, 2020).

@dianpuhoudexiaowu: Fang Fang told the people of Wuhan not to forget the disasters. Failures and disasters force people to reflect, and victory makes people blind. Just like the Jiawu War Memorial in the hometown of Weihai, a monument should not be a trophy for victory and success, but a tombstone, representing regret and indomitable cry. I think it is here too, at least I hope so! (March 25, 2020)

Included in the narrative of the victorious handling of the COVID-19 outbreak was the characterization of lockdown measures as smooth and unproblematic. According to the white paper: “sufficient supplies of coal, electricity, fuel, gas, and heat ensured the normal functioning of society and the smooth implementation of quarantine measures in Hubei and particularly in Wuhan.” Moreover, such measures were illustrated as “meeting residents’ needs and ensuring safety.” (CSCIO 2020) Wuhan’s comparatively quick reopening indicates that this description was not wholly false, but comments on the wailing wall evidence its incompleteness. Namely, netizens outwardly contested the “smooth quarantine” narratives through the sharing of their individual sufferings while in isolation:

@lan\*\*\*\*xw: Dr. Li, [I] come to see you. I believe that there must be no lies and deception in heaven. Take good care of yourself! Nowadays, the world is like hell. The great government uses garbage trucks to deliver food. The property servicers sell high-priced rotten vegetables and do not allow residents to buy cheap delivered vegetables. The beasts [in the government] have been crazy to the point that they can’t be crazier. Only the poor people in XX have to pay for all this evil! (March 13, 2020)

In the comments, there was no sense of victory, but an expression of hardship, isolation, hunger, and trauma not only during the lockdown or quarantine, but also in everyday lives. These comments contradict with the official victory narratives promoted by CCP. On January 23, 2021, one year after Wuhan’s lockdown, many netizens left their messages at the virtual wailing wall to remember what happened:

@fengfeng89315: At ten o’clock on the same day last year, Wuhan was locked down. The vast city that used to be busy with traffic became quiet in one moment. [I recall] many lives were gone suddenly, and masks left deep marks on the faces of medical professionals...tears filled my eyes whenever I recall it. Wenliang, I miss you!

@zhangfei03848: Lao Li, a year ago today, I was in the same city with you. In order to earn more money, I chose to go home on Lunar New Year’s Eve, but I was trapped in Wuhan. I spent 75 days alone without talking with anyone, which led to my light depression now. As a post-90s generation, the pressure is really great. I want to commit



suicide several times this year, and I will come to Weibo to see you every time I am depressed. Your spirit has always supported me. I've never idolized any superstars. I've made you my idol.

@yuangunmeng: Today is the first anniversary of Wuhan's lockdown. I can't help but think of you on the bus to the hospital. Visiting your Weibo makes my eyes wet again. Thank you very much. Thank you for letting us take the lead in starting vigilance. We carried it over, so did Wuhan and Hubei. After all, you didn't carry it over. Dr. Li, Li Wenliang, who will be one year old soon, must be happy wherever he is! We missed you!

@gandieqianniguomalu: At this time last year, the Red Cross received donated supplies but did not distribute them. The doctors were not able to get donated supplies even with approval letters. However, the government leader's driver was able to take away a box of [donated] masks. Wuhan was locked down, but one lady from Beijing could return to Beijing all the way. An ordinary person needed to knock the gong on their balcony [to get help]. Volunteers were detained and not released...

Many netizens expressed their deep gratitude to Dr. Li for his early warnings that saved many lives. The battle against Covid-19 pandemic has never been a "victory" for ordinary people, their losses and trauma are immeasurable, and the virtual wailing wall is a place for them to mourn, to wail, to remember, and to recover. Although Dr. Li's name was never mentioned in the white paper, netizens have remembered him by visiting his Weibo, leaving messages, and supporting each other at the virtual wailing wall.

The alleviation of poverty was another key point addressed in the white paper. More specifically, Xi Jinping's goal of eliminating rural poverty by 2020 was mentioned frequently throughout the report. Discussion of this initiative was accompanied by reassurances of the resilience of China's economic and social order, and the governmental ambition to place "people's lives over economic growth" (CSCIO 2020). Included in this emphasis was the acknowledgment of the potential economic downturn associated with pandemic-prevention measures, but the white paper maintained that upon the resumption of relative normalcy, "the supply of water, electricity, natural gas and telecommunication services continues, as does the supply of daily necessities in urban and rural areas" (CSCIO 2020). Once again, this official governmental narrative does not fully represent the toils of its citizens. Users imparted their experiences with poverty and economic hardship at the virtual wailing wall:

@haitangshinidexiao: Dr. Li, I accidentally knew that there was an Influencer, Mocha, who had a difficult life without any complaints. I just found out that there is someone who buys medicines by grains, that there really is someone who doesn't know the tradition of eating dumplings or rice balls on the winter solstice. The last poverty-stricken county got rid of poverty on November 20th [2019]. The live broadcast membership [of Mocha] was provided by fans, and the equipment was donated by fans. [Mocha] could not afford 10 yuan [1.54 USD] strawberries. I just found out that, nowadays, there are still people in China who die from keto acid poisoning (starvation). Why is there no

social relief system? (January 18-23, 2021)

@youyoudeyulixue: The pandemic in Beijing is still severe. The hope of resuming work has eventually vanished. I wonder if I should just stop here and spend time with my child. However, the entire team has more than 30 people, both old and young, and I don't want them and their families to lose financial resources during this special time. Keep striving or not? It is a question. I feel much better after I said this. I hope we are all fine. (June 26, 2020)

@fensexiaoxiongzxy: I still haven't returned to work. I've been at home for more than five months now. I've already wanted to go out and find a job. Working at home can't maintain family affection anymore. The most terrifying thing is that I don't have any financial resources. I only spent 142 yuan [22 USD] last month. (May 2, 2020)

Dr. Li Wenliang's wailing wall became a haven of free expression that allowed for diverse, genuine experiences and emotions of the COVID-19 pandemic to be shared, even when nonaligned with governmental recounts of the same event. This extra-institutional space transcended official narratives of the pandemic as a victorious war and brought the personal yet relatable tragedies of the people to the forefront. In the case of Dr. Li Wenliang himself, the dissenting opinions of the wall-goers were powerful and numerous enough to influence the central government's official remembrance. If it were not for the mass commemoration of the doctor, the "rumor-spreader" narrative may have persisted. This not only illustrates the expressive agency asserted by Chinese netizens online, but also provides candid and humanized insights into the experiences of those living at ground-zero of an unprecedented global pandemic.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic radically changed the world on both individual and global scales. Especially in China, the first country affected by the new coronavirus, the lives of millions were suddenly altered in early 2020. Although the Chinese populace was able to mobilize quickly to combat the virus, the CCP's narratives describing such responses downplayed the everyday sufferings of the people. Consequently, Chinese netizens, exhibiting their expressive agency despite this strict narrative-control, independently organized at Dr. Li's virtual wailing wall to candidly offer their experiences to one another. Dr. Li Wenliang himself, the first herald of the coming pandemic, became a symbol for solidarity, honesty, vulnerability, and courage in such an unprecedented time of crisis.

The concept of a virtual wailing wall is a new, unique category that transcends prior understandings of shrines and mourning sites, as well as online contention and activism. The site, though catalyzed by Dr. Li Wenliang, is not exclusively a monument to him. It is rather the foundation of a broad community of netizens all undergoing the collective experience of the pandemic. Further, the wall is not solely a place for mourning. As illustrated above, the post became a site for religious, cultural, and personal commemoration, as well as the celebrations of personal victories, delibera-

tion on current events, and countless other expressions. Even when physically isolated during the pandemic, the connective power of the internet allowed Chinese citizens to spontaneously congregate at the wall. The multiplicity of the wall's functions, as well as the inclusivity and sheer breadth of its associated community distinguish it from traditional grassroots shrines. At the same time, the wall's existence alone challenges governmental narratives about both Li Wenliang as an individual and the COVID-19 pandemic. Wall-goers openly remonstrated against the government through their direct criticisms and personal anecdotes alike. This activist quality of the virtual wailing wall further differentiates it as a transcendental space. Finally, the wall responds to the incompleteness of governmental accounts of the pandemic. By allowing users to relate to each other's lived tragedies, the wall can be understood as a virtual museum of experiences at ground-zero of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our analysis of the virtual wailing wall responds to ongoing scholarly discussions surrounding online activism, grassroots memorialization, and the folklore of the pandemic. As discussed above, extra-institutional spaces for expressive agency and unofficial activism have been considered by scholars to have significantly decreased since Xi Jinping's assumption of office. This study challenges such conclusions by framing the virtual wailing wall as a successful, extra-institutional venue for spontaneous deliberation. This is not to say that the wall was immune from any kind of censorship, but that the narratives outwardly challenged at it demonstrate an unprecedented degree of agency in the era of Xi. Virtual wailing walls as online commemorative sites that resist official narratives and demonstrate freedom of speech resonate with diverse pandemic jokes, songs, memes, legends, anecdotes, and practices across various online networks (Rouhier-Willoughby and Jurić 2021; Sebba-Elran 2021), which demonstrate the power of folklore in the face of crisis.

Our three-pronged analytical framework involving the virtual, the wailing, and the wall can be applied to other posts from China and around the world. For instance, another virtual wailing wall arose on May 22, 2021, to commemorate Liang Jing, an ultramarathon champion who died when a weather disaster interrupted a race in Gansu Province. Chinese netizens similarly visited Liang Jing's final TikTok post to commemorate his death, and journalists created a virtual memorial wall for all the 21 dead runners on social media (GQ Baodao 2021). The victims' families and netizens pushed the local government to investigate the causes of this tragedy, eventually resulting in 27 officials being punished for their dereliction of duty (Xinjing Newspaper 2021). Our proposed frameworks can be used to understand the intersections of online activism and folk memorialization at such sites. Continued research on this subject will help solidify the concept of a virtual wailing wall, and ultimately further develop a holistic understanding of the expressive agency of ordinary people during the global pandemic around the world.

### Notes

- 1 Transmedia is commonly defined as a narrative or project that combines multiple media forms, whereas multimedia refers to using many forms of media to tell a story and placing them all on one channel.
- 2 Weibo is one of the most influential social media platforms in China, with around 2 billion active users per day. Weibo users engage in a wide range of activities including composing and reading posts about daily life, politics, sports, and other topics of interest. Dr. Li Wenliang was one such active user.
- 3 A netizen is a user of the internet, especially a habitual one. The term is a portmanteau of the English words internet and citizen, as in a “citizen of the net” or “net citizen”.
- 4 The Wailing Wall (or Western Wall) in Jerusalem is among the most holy sites in Judaism. It not only serves as a shrine for commemoration and prayer, but can also symbolize components of Jewish identity itself (Cohen-Hattab and Bar 2018, 281–300).
- 5 It is a qualitative data analysis software that allows us to collect, organize, analyze and visualize unstructured data.
- 6 Weibo usernames are unique, user-chosen nicknames, usually a combination of Chinese characters, letters, numbers and symbols. We replaced all the Chinese characters with lowercase pinyin when citing usernames in this project.
- 7 The term “tree hole” originates from the Greek myth “The King With Donkey Ears” that has been adapted and widely circulated in China (Baidu Baike, n.d.). <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%A0%91%E6%B4%9E/23519350>.
- 8 Fang Fang, a Wuhan writer, whose quarantine diary involving critiques of officials brought controversy.

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## Response

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### Public Memorialization during COVID-19 in China

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*Germany*

A growing body of literature recognizes that digitization affects people's way of remembering. Opposing the often-taken view of shrinking spaces due to strict censorship mechanisms under Xi Jinping, Hinden, You, and Guo argue that Dr. Li Wenliang's wailing wall shows that digital tools enable new space for contesting official narratives by ordinary people. Trained by experienced restrictions, netizens use folkloristic elements, e.g., "jokes, songs, memes, legends, anecdotes, and practices across various online networks" (p. 19), to circumvent the possibility of becoming harmonized by the Chinese censorship authority.

Digitization is an essential aspect of remembrance and memorialization in China. Authoritarian regimes tend to seize control over collective memories to ensure their offered narratives and power legitimacy. After the crackdown of protests in Hong Kong and the new restrictions on free speech, the 6.4 Museum and the pillar of shame were closed to the public, respectively deconstructed. These memorial places were the last publicly accessible spaces for the Tiananmen Square Protests and Massacre in 1989. Within weeks after inaccessibility, a digital museum and an open-source 3-D print model of the pillar of shame were released publicly available.

Due to digital technologies, marginal-

ized groups and forbidden memories can emerge and be maintained. Since digitization and datafication in China develop much faster than in other societies, technical possibilities of safeguarding contesting narratives can challenge a nation's collective memory. But also, the state government has more and more advanced capabilities to contain critical voices. The protests of the zero-COVID policy at the end of 2022 exemplify that even though censorship plays a vital role in controlling open spaces, "political control shapes the forms of online activism but cannot forbid it from occurring" (p. 3).

The outbreak of COVID-19 marks a historic turning point. Pictures and news of the dramatic situation in Wuhan and other cities in China where new hospitals were built overnight are deeply carved into the nation's collective memory. Despite Chinese efforts to keep the outbreak's origin secret, Dr. Li Wenliang declared that he observed a new kind of pneumonia for the first time. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, became a social media hero. Nevertheless, he was officially blamed for publishing false statements after he informed colleagues and several patients about a series of pneumonia cases via a WeChat group. Shortly after his last post on Weibo, he died from COVID, and his post became a "wailing wall" not only for COVID-related but also for other suffering-related content and comments.

Despite massive efforts to censor protests and counter-narratives on social media, Dr. Li Wenliang's wailing wall remains public. And, as Hinden, You, and Guo argue, "Dr. Li's wailing wall provides a spillway space for the unprecedented vulnerability needed in these times [and] can also be understood as a

“tree hole” - a space for sharing secrets safely without fear of social consequence or backlash” (p. 6).

Furthermore, recent phenomena show that grassroots activism also in China can provoke state authorities. “Voices of April,” a video compilation of “harmonized” posts, a trending euphemism for censored content, was recently put online and caused attention in China and reached newsrooms worldwide.

The fight against COVID-19 became a question of interpretational sovereignty. Less than one year after the Chinese government officially confirmed the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, governmental agencies opened exhibitions to tell the “true story” of China’s fight against the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is presenting itself as a leading figure behind the pandemic, containment, despair, anger, and suffering of China’s Zero-COVID-19 strategy are posted on social media by Chinese citizens. Hinden, You, and Guo argue that the official narrative of the CCP is challenged due to grassroots activism (p. 2). Dealing with narratives also means dealing with memories.<sup>2</sup> Narratives of events and other incidents can adjust how a nation will remember certain history. Shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the official narrative mentioned the suffering and difficult service by doctors and medical staff and committed the whole country to a collective fight against COVID. Meanwhile, the narrative is re-framed and declares several heroes fighting against the pandemic. Notwithstanding his official rehabilitation, Li Wenliang is not part of the narrative and remains unmentioned in official speeches and the latest updated edition of the school curriculum. In the

primary school reader, people are cited as “we are CCP members, we will serve first” to build a stable “Great Wall” fighting the “COVID demon.”<sup>3</sup>

Zhong Nanshan, a Chinese pulmonologist and political advisor, took his place in the official storytelling. In 2020, he was honored with the Medal of the Republic, China’s highest decoration for Chinese nationals. During the pandemic, he promoted traditional Chinese medicine, especially Lianhua Qingwen capsules, for treating a COVID-19 infection. Although he denies any commercial ties with pharmaceutical companies, an article from Retraction Watch investigated that Zhong has financial ties to the Yiling Pharmaceutical company, which produces this medicine.<sup>4</sup>

The way Chinese people should remember the “fight against Covid” is formed by the question of what is assumed as worth remembering by the CCP. Promoting traditional Chinese medicine (TCM),<sup>5</sup> highlighting the Zhong Nanshan over Li Wenliang, and the negative campaigning against mRNA-vaccines<sup>6</sup> shows that the focus is on combatting the pandemic with Chinese characteristics—a common slogan to claim a separate way of acting because of specific Chinese circumstances and demands. Prioritizing TCM over Western medicine is also an observed trend in Chinese social media, e.g., on the online platform Weixin.<sup>7</sup>

The Chinese official discourse follows the storytelling of Chinese superiority in fighting COVID-19 over the Western system. A recent and widespread article by Shen Zhongwen at Shenzhen Special Zone Daily described the question of “dynamic zero-COVID” or “coexisting with COVID” as a battle of ideas, political systems, national power, governance capaci-



ty, and even civilizations. Shen attests that the Chinese anti-Covid policy follows the “people first, life first” principle.<sup>8</sup> Despite the recent tendency of Chinese officials to rewrite the official narrative, the digitized community acts as a resilient agency contesting official memory. Even though the authors describe Li Wenliang’s wall “as a virtual museum of experiences at ground-zero of the COVID-19 pandemic” (p. 19), it should be questioned whether this kind of protest and wailing can influence state narratives or will co-exist as a contesting narrative. But it is worth mentioning that Li Wenliang’s last post on Weibo is still accessible, and people constantly add new comments. His post “serve[s] as a spontaneous shrine for inclusive grassroots memorialization” (p. 7).

#### Notes

- 1 “Exhibition in Wuhan: personality cult in the shadow of the virus [Ausstellung in Wuhan: Personenkult im Schatten des Virus],” tagesschau.de, 2020, accessed May 27, 2022, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/wuhan-ausstellung-101.html>.
- 2 Wolfgang Bergem, „Narrative Formen in Geschichtspolitik und Erinnerungskultur,” in *Narrative Formen der Politik* (Springer, 2014).
- 3 Yujun Wu 吴玉军, ed., *Xi Jinping xin shidai Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi sixiang xuesheng duben* 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想学生读本 [*Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era Student Reader*], 4 vols., vol. 1 (Beijing: Peoples Education Press [人民教育出版社], 2021), 16.
- 4 “China Covid-19 tsar pushed treatments without revealing business ties,” *Financial Times*, 2022, accessed 27.05.2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/fcac2cbc-4bff-44f5-81bf-66db32b99fca>; „Promi-

nent Chinese scientist failed to disclose company ties in COVID-19 clinical trial paper,” *Retraction Watch*, 2021, accessed May 27, 2022, <https://retractionwatch.com/2021/05/04/prominent-chinese-scientist-failed-to-disclose-company-ties-in-clinical-trial-paper/>.

- 5 Boli Zhang 张伯礼, “Zhongyi kangyi de wemnhua zixin 中医抗疫的文化自信 [Cultural Self-Confidence of Traditional Chinese Medicine fighting Covid],” 2021, [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwg/2021-03/26/c\\_1127258682.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwg/2021-03/26/c_1127258682.htm).
- 6 Alexandra Stevenson, „These Vaccines Have Been Embraced by the World. Why Not in China?,” 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/business/china-coronavirus-vaccines.html>.
- 7 For example: Director Guo talks about health 郭主任谈健康, “Zhongyao qianjin tengsu! Xinguan zhiliao xinyao! Yizhi bingdu 15393 bei, huo guojia faming zhuanli shouquan, xia bannian jinru linchuang shiyan 中药千金藤素! 新冠治疗新药! 抑制病毒15393倍, 获国家发明专利授权, 下半年进入临床试验 [Chinese medicine Qianjinsu! Novel coronavirus treatment new drug! Suppressed the virus by 15,393 times, is authorized by the national invention patent, and enters clinical trials in the second half of the year],” 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/A8v-D4rxm3Y1oLGTv3PqKhA>; Yiyao 医药慧, „Zhexie yao, dui fangzhi xinguan you mingxian liaoxiao! 这些中药, 对防治新冠有明显疗效! [These traditional Chinese medicines have obvious curative effects on preventing and treating the new covid],” 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/cG1T7EtXqrjiKZ3zTAAifg>; Quanjie Wen 文泉杰, „Quanju xinguang huanzhe tupo 70 wan, yiwei zhiliao xinguan feiyan youxiaoli 100% de zhongyao bei faxian le 全球新冠患者突破70万, 一味治疗新冠肺炎有效率达100%的中药被发现了 [The number of new crown patients worldwide has exceeded 700,000, and traditional Chinese medicine with a 100%

effective rate of blindly treating new covid pneumonia has been discovered],“ 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/siszdZYue9iLjjwgkCP3SQ>.

- 8 Zhongwen Shen 沈仲文, “Dongtai qingling’ shi daying yiqing fangkong yingzhang de biyou zhilu “动态清零”是打赢疫情防控硬仗的必由之路 [‘Dynamic Zero-Covid’ is the only way to win the tough battle of epidemic prevention and control],“ 2022, <https://www.dutenews.com/tewen/p/6630273.html>.

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