"This is China's Wailing Wall"

Chronotopes and the configuration of Li Wenliang on Weibo

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Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, was accused of spreading rumors when he sent a WeChat message containing the diagnostic report of a suspicious pneumonia case to a group of friends. When he later died from COVID-19, his Weibo page quickly become known as "China's Wailing Wall," where hundreds of thousands of netizen shared replies to his final post in a mega-thread that continues into the present. Drawing upon a selection of posts from an archive of messages posted to Li's Weibo in the year following his death, this article examines how participants used chronotopes (Bhaktin 1981) to situate Li vis-à-vis various culturally salient "figures of personhood" (Agha 2005; Park 2021), including "moral hero," "kin figure," and/or "deity." Our analysis further suggests how such positioning, as a response to grief and uncertainty, "moved" authors into a position of distance from hegemonic national chronotopes situating people in a symbiotic relationship of mutual care with the Chinese state. Our analysis thus offers insight into the ways in which collective crises have the capacity to (but do not necessarily) motivate a complex discursive and relational process through which interlocutors enact *scalar intimacy* (Pritzker and Perrino 2020) as they grapple with shifts in their felt experience of nationhood and/or "culture."

Keywords: chronotopes, China, Li Wenliang, COVID-19, scalar intimacy

China becomes 'China' in the world…only in the globally entwined material and ideological conditions created for the re-narration of the past in light of new demands on the present and new hopes for the future
–Rebecca Karl

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1. Introduction

On December 30, 2019, Dr. Li Wenliang – a thirty-four-year-old ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital – sent a WeChat message containing a diagnostic report of a suspicious pneumonia case to a group of friends and medical school classmates. He warned them to be careful and requested that they keep the information confidential until further notice. When the message nevertheless went viral, Li was summoned to the office of the local Public Security Bureau (PSB) and accused of "rumor-mongering." On January 30, however, Li tested positive for COVID-19. On the same day, he posted a Weibo update sharing his diagnosis as well as his story of being silenced. He died a week later, on February 7, 2020.

When his death was made public, it seemed as if both space and time collapsed into a singular experience of grief and despair in China. A massive online response ensued. Indeed, an unprecedented number of Chinese citizens – including those in corporate and government positions who normally eschew public political expression of any kind – spoke out to express their sadness and call for justice for Li. Yet others saw Li's silencing as an index of a range of broader issues related to constraints upon freedom of speech in China (see Pritzker: In Press).[1] Many posts regarding Li Wenliang thus consisted of explicit critiques of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and were deleted from *most* of the Chinese internet by state censors within hours.

Meanwhile, Li Wenliang's Weibo page[2] became known as "China's Wailing Wall" as hundreds of thousands of netizens contributed replies to his final post, on January 31, 2020, in which he shared his positive COVID-19 diagnosis (Li and Taylor 2020; Rudolph 2020a; Wade 2021). A mega-thread of individual comments – sometimes with short breakout subthreads – thus began to take shape. Although tightly managed by state censors, this continuous thread reached nearly one million messages in the year following his death and continues, as of this writing, into the present (see, e.g., Carter 2022). Indeed, between February 2020 and February 2021, there were somewhere between 1500 and 3000 comments on a daily basis, posted by roughly 800,000 separate Weibo users based throughout all 34 provinces of China as well as overseas (Zhou and Zhong 2021).

The tone on China's Wailing Wall is often described, in both media and academic investigations, as consisting primarily of affective and largely apolitical mes-

1. Although "free speech" is technically guaranteed by Article 35 of China's 1982 Constitution, netizens here drew on the example of Li Wenliang to interrogate the ways in which his silencing indexed the larger issue of censorship as it is deployed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) both online and off (Palmer 2010; Hu, 2014).

2. Li Wenliang's Weibo page: https://www.weibo.com/u/1139098205?is_all=1#1593125321205

sages. Indeed, most posts, writes Rudolph (2020a: NP), consist of "commonplace, cordial, loving messages written to a trusted friend." In a study of aggregated messages over the full year after Li's death, moreover, Zhou and Zhong (2021) note that, while sadness, anger, and anxiety dominated the majority of messages posted in February 2020, the tone of messages after this trended towards more positive emotions. They observe that the most common communicative acts on the site, for example, consisted of largely apolitical, affective activities such as mourning, paying respect, offering updates on personal or world events, daily/holiday greetings, or confiding "feelings and personal issues" (as cited in Wade 2021: NP). Other scholars have highlighted, however, how conversation on Li's page serves as a site for implicitly enacting a distinctly counterhegemonic form of collective memory (Cao and Zeng, 2021). Messages to Li – even if only seemingly mundane greetings– often implicitly enacted a kind of *corrective* as well as collective memory-keeping strategy with political implications in what Hillenbrand (2020) dubs the "cryptocracy" of China.

The current article examines how participants chronotopically configure Li Wenliang, positioning him in various culturally salient roles or "figures of personhood" (Agha 2005; Park 2021), including moral hero, kin figure, and deity. Rather than drawing upon an archive of messages that remain public on Li's Weibo page, however, we turn towards an examination of an archive of roughly 10,000 censored or at-risk posts on Li's Weibo maintained by *China Digital Times* (CDT), described further below. Here, following Rebecca Karl's astute observation that "China becomes China in the world as the past is…reconfigured in light of new demands on the present and new hopes for the future" (2020: 4), we investigate messages containing the terms "China" and/or "Chinese" (中国 *Zhongguo*) or which refer indirectly to China through the deployment of deictic formulations, such as "this nation" or "our country." With a detailed analysis of several key examples, we discuss the implications of various chronotopic formulations of Li Wenliang for understanding the ways in which participants enact *scalar intimacy* as they position themselves within a shared national space-time chronotopically imagined as "home." This article thus engages with the ways in which collective crises, including Li's death and events related to the global spread of COVID-19, invite reconfigurations of the intimate ways in which citizens understand themselves in the world and in relation to others.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The notion of scalar intimacy, as developed by Pritzker and Perrino (2020), refers to the relationally situated process through which people orient or "position

themselves…vis-à-vis not just other humans, but also multiple culturally salient models of the self, family, and nation" (2020: 366). When people enact scalar intimacy, in other words, they take up positions and roles that sometimes align with or "move towards" dominant and/or shared concepts, ideologies, attitudes, and practices and sometimes adopt a more critical stance that "moves away from" such structures. The enactment of scalar intimacy is thus inherently chronotopic in that it hinges upon the socially situated engagement by particular speakers, with overlapping spatial, temporal, and moral "signs of difference" (Gal and Irvine 2019). Contrasts, for example, between here/there, now/then, us/them – often deictically invoked in the very grammar of particular utterances – *place* people in space and time as well as in relation to one another in a range of ways that sometimes afford and sometimes foreclose the co-construction of any kind of felt, embodied intimacy or sense of shared experience.

In this sense, scalar intimacy points to an emergent process whereby speakers continually position themselves vis-à-vis one another within and in relation to dominant *cultural chronotopes* or "depictions of place-time-and-personhood to which social interactants orient when they engage each other" (Agha 2007: 320). From the perspective of scalar intimacy, cultural chronotopes are thus also *intimate* in that they serve as embodied *orienting devices* that, within collaborative encounters, serve to mediate interlocutors' affective, physiological, and social experience of themselves in relation to others and the world in time and space (Ahmed 2007; Pritzker and Perrino 2020: 365). As particular speakers enact scalar intimacy, finally, vastly different scales of experience, from society to the individual, from the political to the intimate, are drawn into alignment in ways that often entrench them as the kind of hegemonic "scalar intimacies" that often prevail, through active and agentive forms of participation, across sites (Delfino 2021; Wong et al. 2021)

Scalar intimacy, as we suggest here, further hinges upon the casting of repeated contrasts between spaces, times, and recognizable *figures of personhood*, or "characterological figures stereotypically linked to speech repertoires (and associated signs) by a population of users" (Agha 2005: 45). Such castings here serve as complex, indexical orienting devices that "place" speakers experientially *in* the world as moral beings who enter into relationships with one another. As speakers orient to one another and the activity at hand, they often take up a set of overlapping and collectively recognized moral, affective, and relational positions or "roles" (Agha, 2005; Park, 2021). In doing so, they contribute to the emergent co-creation of cultural chronotopes. The discursive configuration of figures of personhood in interaction here functions as a metapragmatic and chronotopic as well as affective "anchor" (Park 2021: 51), situating interlocutors vis-à-vis inhabitable "cultural categories" or "broader social types" (Agha 2005: 40). Both cultural

chronotopes and the chronotopic formulation of figures of personhood thus constitute enduring cultural repertoires to which people continually orient in interaction. As Wirtz (2016: 345) emphasizes, however, such hegemonic chronotopes are not necessarily always "totalizing."

In China, for example, the chronotope of "home" or "family" (家 *jia*) aligns at multiple, simultaneous scales, from the phenomenological to the political. The home chronotope often invokes physical home-spaces, for example, including one's current or natal dwelling as well as cities or towns constituting one's adopted or "native home" (家乡*jiaxiang*) (Joniak-Luthi, 2015). It is simultaneously a relational construct, however, giving rise to what has been imagined as "spatial kinship" or a felt sense of connection between friends and neighbors occupying the same home-place (Fei, 1992: 121–27, as cited in Joniak-Luthi, 2015: 67). As numerous scholars have observed, recent narratives of the Chinese "nation-family" (国家 *guojia*) have taken up this chronotopic casting of home and kinship to formulate collective spaces in China through the lens of an idealized "harmonious society" (和谐社会 *hexie shehui)* Promoted by the state, the notion of a harmonious society is ubiquitous in contemporary China. As several scholars have noted, the harmony chronotope is intimately embodied in a lived orientation that is comfortable with order and fearful of "chaos" (乱 *luan*) (Fu 2020; Karl 2020). It is thus often brought to life in contrasts between China and other nations, often the United States and Africa, as well as regions within China such as Hong Kong and Xinjiang province, mapped as dangerous and disorderly.

The harmonious nation-family, as a kind of "home-time" is also mapped, however, as a continual relational process that takes place through an ongoing and reciprocal form of care within which individuals care for one another and society while society cares for them (Karl 2020, Zhang 2020, Yang 2018, Wong et al. 2021). The home chronotope here provides both a structure and a felt experience in interactions within which interlocutors position themselves vis-à-vis one another as well as shared moral ideals. Interlocutors enact scalar intimacy by positioning themselves in relation to spaces imagined as "home" or "not home," for example, they participate in the continual re-creation of familiar institutions, relationships, and roles that, at broader scales, reproduce the nation (Wong et al. 2021).

Collective events, especially tragic and/or traumatic events such as the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province or the spread of COVID-19 across the globe, however, often throw people into a new positionality vis-à-vis the kinds of issues that exist in "normal times" but which become visible as problematic in the face of crisis (Xu 2017). These kinds of events and encounters, many of which are experienced as *ongoing*, often expose the tensions that prevail in scalar, chronotopic alignments that map the (Han) nation as a large-scale family and, accordingly, map the individual family as a reflection of the nation. In addition to a sense of

disorientation, such events and encounters also – at least sometimes – afford the kind of scrutinization and interrogation framed by Pritzker (In Press) as scalar *inquiry*. The current article, however, centers a slightly more nuanced process that began to emerge when Li Wenliang's story was made public, provoking a rupture in the certainty with which many middle-class Han citizens experience themselves as and in relation to the nation. The following sections thus emphasize how participants contributed to the co-construction a new Chinese "home" on the Wailing Wall under circumstances within which the "nation-family" (国家*guojia*) very suddenly and dramatically no longer felt like the home they had previously imagined it to be.

3. Data and Methods

While previous studies of China's Wailing Wall have relied on messages continuing to exist on Li's Weibo page, the data for this paper derive from the ongoing archive of roughly 15,000 hand-selected comments, threads, and images posted on Li Wenliang's Weibo page maintained by Hu in relation to his role as Assistant Manager at *China Digital Times* (CDT). This archive is unique in that it is selective, inclusive of individual messages, images, and selected short subthreads on Li's wall, and is explicitly maintained in relation to CDT's longstanding commitment to gather "content that has been or is in danger of being censored in China."[3] Censorship in China, as noted by Roberts (2018), is difficult to predict and/or track, however. This is in large part due to the way it functions primarily through *friction*, which involves increasing the costs required to access information that conflicts with state media, and *flooding*, wherein provocative content with comments that seem strategically crafted, writes Roberts, "to distract from political arguments" (2018: 210). On Li's wall, for instance, as Wade (2021) notes, "deletion of posts after the fact is only one form of censorship potentially affecting the balance of the Wall's content: numerous sensitive keywords are blocked from posting in the first place, while some posts are accepted but visible only to their authors" (2021:NP) All of the above makes it difficult to track what has been buried, lost, or eliminated entirely from Chinese social media sites.

An investigation conducted by Wade (2021), however, offers perspective into the validity of the CDT Wailing Wall archive. Specifically, Wade conducted a detailed review of Zhou and Zhong's large-scale sentiment analysis, supplementing publicly available data with messages in the CDT archive for corresponding dates. In doing so, he significantly complicates the conclusions that Li's page con-

3. https://chinadigitaltimes.net/about/

stitutes an "extended affective space" in which "humanity, warmth, and love" ultimately constitutes the moral atmosphere on the site (2021:NP). He shows, rather, a considerably more complex picture of the types of sentiment expressed on Li's page, especially in relation to the numerous controversies and scandals throughout the year (see Table 1).

Table 1. Timeline of events, including events correlating with spikes of activity on Li Wenliang's Weibo page (excluding anniversaries), 2019–2020

Date	Event(s)
2/7/2020	Li pronounced dead
3/10/2020	A scandal emerges in response to the removal of an interview with Li's colleague, Dr. Ai Fen, from Chinese media streams.
3/19/2020	Li's status officially reinstated; Wuhan officials sanctioned
4/2/2020	Li officially named a "martyr"; posthumously awarded May Fourth Medal
4/4/2020	Qingming Festival (National Memorial Day)
4/8/2020	Wuhan lockdown lifted
6/12/2020	Li's wife gives birth to a son
6/19/2020	Millions of comments on Li's final post mysteriously disappeared. They were just as mysteriously reinstated on his page shortly afterwards, however.
9/8/2020	Li is excluded from official CCP recognition of role models in China's fight against COVID-19
12/31/2020	New Year's Eve; anniversary of Li's initial warning
2/7/2021	Anniversary of Li's death

Wade thus observes that, in addition to the messages of hope and warmth, there is also often a distinct sense of anger, dismay, disappointment, and/or defeat that is often explicitly or implicitly tied to broadly scaled ideas about Chinese society or the Chinese state. Wade's analysis, we suggest here, confirms the validity of the CDT archive as a collection of posts that have been eliminated or buried in some way. It also underscores the ways in which expressing love and care for Li and one another, as we suggest below, immediately enacts a chronotopic rescaling of the personal, social, and political landscape of the nation.

The CDT archive thus constitutes a reliable record of messages, including 10–150 messages per day from March 2020 through February 2021, that are largely no longer visible on Li's public-facing Weibo page. The nature of the CDT archive does, however, present several challenges and limitations for our analysis. Unlike research driven by the collection of emergent, multi-party interactions occurring synchronously or even asynchronously, for example, the CDT archive includes

many individual messages taken out of their immediate interactional context. Though sometimes preserved with responses shared by others in the thread or sub-thread, it is impossible to guarantee that such interactions are "intact." We draw attention here, however, to what might be framed as the *overall* participation framework on Li's wall, which took shape – in the year following his death – as millions of Chinese netizens visited, on a daily basis, to pay respect to Li as well as to *relate* to him as they struggled to make sense of local and global events, controversies, and encounters. Though not necessarily representative of the general conversation on Li's Weibo page, each post preserved in the CDT archive, from this perspective, can be read as an index of a broader conversation that took shape, over time, on China's Wailing Wall. Our analysis thus engages with each of the following examples as singular, on one hand, and yet as deeply connected to a broader conversation that is itself formatted as a continuous stream of interaction in a single thread.

The analysis for this paper, more specifically, began with an emergent coding process within which we observed that a significant number of messages, on any given day, mentioned the term "China" or referred in some way to Chinese society. Upon a detailed review of these messages, roughly 250 examples were coded as enacting a positioning of some kind vis-à-vis Li, who was placed – through greetings as well as grammatical configurations – in various recognizable roles. The remainder of this paper focuses on the most common roles or "figures of personhood" (Agha 2005) applied to Li. The following sections thus offer several examples of messages in which authors relate to Li as a moral hero, a kin figure, and/or a deity. In many cases, it is important to note, however, these categories blurred and overlapped, or messages moved back and forth quickly between them. The following analysis nonetheless adopts these broad categories so as to conduct an in-depth analysis of the ways in which authors, within particular messages, scalar intimacy constitutes a relationally emergent process that unsettles normative scales of distinction that inhere in dominant cultural chronotopes. Throughout the paper, finally, we incorporate a number of measures to ensure author anonymity, including the presentation of English translations (ours); the removal of all identifying information such as handles and profile images; and the ubiquitous application of the singular they to describe the gender of particular authors.

4. Formulating Li as a Moral Hero

As previous noted in the literature, many middle-class Han Chinese citizens were moved – almost instantly – to identify with Li, as if he not only reflected but constituted an aspect of *themselves* (Pritzker 2020, In Press). Here, it is important to

recognize the ways in which Li Wenliang appeared as the very pinnacle of Han middle class success. Li was not only an ethnically-Han, cisgendered man, for example, but he was also a member of the CCP and a devoted husband, father, and son. He embodied, in other words, the gendered cultural ideal of "the able-responsible man" (Wong 2020) whose primary concerns were grounded in care for those close to him as well as society more broadly.

Li's success – and his relatability – was seen here not just in terms of his professional accomplishments but also in terms of his professed values and commitments. This recognition, notably, deepened once an interview that Li had conducted with reporters from *Caixin Global* on January 30 was published on February 7 (Qin et al. 2020). In the interview, Li articulated his deep commitment to the maintenance of a harmonious society. He explained, specifically, that, even under the circumstances, he had never wanted and even still did not want to cause any form of "trouble" for himself or society. "I'm afraid of trouble," he said, highlighting the impact such trouble might have on his ability to provide for his family (Qin et al. 2020). Li scaled himself, here, as a "good" citizen (e.g., humble, appropriately state-fearing), who was deeply, even intimately committed to the maintenance of a harmonious Chinese society. Unlike political dissidents or others cast as "disorderly" and dangerous, in other words, Li positioned himself as an upright citizen who was uninterested in disrupting the space-time of national harmony. Li's distinct lack of political ambition and commitment to social harmony here afforded a deep sense of personal identification among many Chinese citizens. Accordingly, the fact that Li had been punished simply for enacting care for those close to him by warning them of a potential threat struck citizens "in a deeply personal way" (Pritzker 2020: 242).

Later in the same interview, however, Li reflected further upon the sociocultural circumstances that had led not only to his own illness but also to the global spread of COVID-19. Here, he said specifically that "A healthy society should have more than one kind of voice. I don't agree with the use of public power to overly interfere" (Qin et al. 2020).[4] Li here issued a fairly overt critique of the ways in which power is (overly) enacted in the state's insistence on suppressing any form of communication – at the scale of the individual as well of the nation – that deviates from officially sanctioned state media. This, we argue, solidified Li's position as a kind of *moral hero* to which people could relate. As Berkowitz (1992) details, the figure of the "Moral Hero" in Chinese philosophy and literature is often a virtuous sage figure who is customarily imagined as a cis-gendered male who demonstrates a quiet, refined, and dignified form of resignation. When called

4. Also frequently translated as "There should be more than one voice in a healthy society" [Chin. "健康的社会不应有一种声音"]

upon to serve the nation, however, the Moral Hero "emerges from rustic obscurity to assist the age" (Berkowitz 1992: 12). Recalling how Li had distinguished himself from "intellectuals" or political dissidents portrayed in terms of their intent to disrupt the harmony of the nation, Li's heroism here inhered in his turn towards a quiet yet profound form of relational justice that is perhaps best depicted in the viral image that circulated in the wake of his death, in which his mask was transformed into barbed wire (see Figure 1).

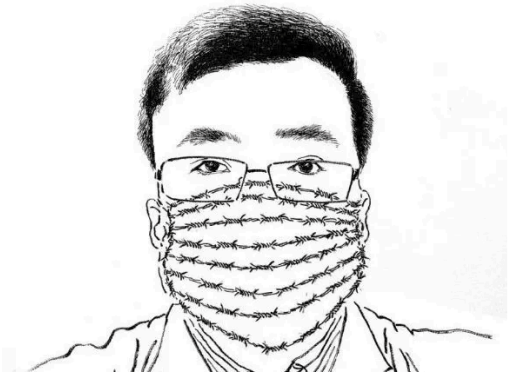

Figure 1. Li Wenliang's face depicted with his mask transformed into barbed wire

Li's dual positioning of himself as an upright citizen at the same time as a *concerned* citizen willing to risk issuing a critique of the government's media policies to contribute to a healthier, more harmonious society here afforded an ongoing and intense form of embodied alignment with Li as a moral hero. Instances of this positioning in messages on Li's wall, we suggest, simultaneously hinge upon and unsettle dominant chronotopic contrasts separating "good" citizens – who are patriotic and compliant for the good of the nation (Karl, 2020) – and "bad" dissidents, who intentionally seek to cause "chaos" (乱 *luan*) within the national community (Fu, 2020).

A Weibo comment posted in March, for example, constitutes one of the more overtly political instances we include in the current analysis. As an example of the ways in which aligning to Li as a moral hero afforded chronotopic recastings of the nation, however, it is an example of the kinds of shifts that we examine here through the lens of scalar intimacy. Beginning by orienting to Li as a national "whistleblower," this author, specifically formulates his heroism as a relational *force* that has significantly shifted their own and many others' experience of both personal and national time-space.

> Dr. Li, go well, please rest assured, your whistle has awakened countless and countless Chinese people, and healed countless and countless Chinese people's eyes. Thank you, we finally know who is our "enemy," now the sound of your whistle is deafening, resounding across the sky! (March 20, 2020)

This post, like many others on the site, opens with a personal address positioning Li as a proximate, moral interlocutor who is imagined to be invested in knowing the outcome of his efforts. Enacting care by telling him to "please rest assured," the author then formulates Li as having inspired a collective scalar shift from sleep to wakefulness. The chronotope of "awakening" functions here to place Li and align with him, configured here in relation to his "whistle," as lifting a kind of veil and thus opening up new possible futures for "countless and countless" Chinese people. Through parallelistic phrasing that repeats "countless and countless," they go on to portray this shift as an embodied form of healing affecting people's *eyes*. This statement, notably, extends Li's professional commitment as an ophthalmologist. After thanking Li, the author then quickly shifts scales, adopting a collective "we" (我们 *wo-men*) voice. Drawing implicitly on a temporally emergent, embodied experience of moving from a state of "not seeing" to "seeing" to represent a shift in awareness that has already occurred, they further incorporate a visual frame within which the crisis of Li's death has made it is impossible not to know "our own enemy." The author here enacts scalar intimacy as a collective repositioning that is mapped in geographic, temporal, and moral terms. This chronotopically (re)positions "Chinese people," including the author, in relation to an *opposing force* of some kind that was previously unknown, but which has now become visible. The "enemy" is left unspecified here, however. The quotes it is embedded within nonetheless suggest that the author is deploying irony to invert the CCP's own widely promulgated formulation of both internal and external others as "enemies," thus indexing (if not directly referencing) the state. The author then closes their message by asserting that Li's whistle is now "deafening, resounding across the sky!" Positioning themselves along with others, in a vast national *soundscape* (Eisenlohr, 2018; Kunreuther, 2018), the message here extends the temporality of the shift that *has* occurred by chronotopically mapping Li's whistle as continuing to resound *over* China in the *present* (e.g., "across the sky!"). In configuring Li as a hero as well as a sociopolitical *healer*, this message evidences scalar intimacy as a form of *political subjectivity* within which "people orient *to* time as well as space as they situate themselves along a spatiotemporal, sociomoral trajectory that is always simultaneously both personal and political" (Pritzker, In Press). The exclamation point at the end of the post, finally, orthographically suggests an optimistic or hopeful anticipatory mode with regards to what such a shift *might* mean in and for the collective future.

A message shared in April adopts a more intimate approach, describing how Li has become a moral figure in the author's home:

> I was reading a book to my daughter, by an Italian painter, named *Dr. Li and the Crown-Wearing Virus*. She heard half of it, and when I told her this was a real story, her eyes lit up and she wanted to jump out of bed. She said that you are really a hero! I believe that your children will it see this way in the future.
>
> (April 21, 2020)

This message, launched without an initial form of address, is nevertheless formulated as a narrative directed towards Li, later addressed as "you" in the reported speech of the daughter. The narrative begins, specifically, with a description of a parent reading a story to their child. Reading together, notably, is a practice that Goodwin and Cekaite note, constitutes an intimate, embodied encounter or "routine of 'being with' one another" (2018: 170). The narrative depiction of this intimate relational context further hinges upon the moral formulation of the culturally salient figures of "parent" and "child." The author thus positions themselves in the role of "engaged parent," while the daughter occupies the innocent, moral position of "the child." Within this emergent relational context, the figure of the child is then animated as experiencing a jolt of excitement and awe upon learning that the story about Li depicted by the book, *Dr. Li and the Crown-Wearing Virus* (Cavallo, 2021), was real. Telling Li that "her eyes lit up and she wanted to jump out of bed," the author here orthographically marks the child's reported utterance with an exclamation point ("you really are a hero!"). The affective impact of the narrative conclusion is thus chronotopically grounded in the affective authority of a child's moral innocence. They conclude, however, by enacting a chronotopic shift in which they embody the moral voice of an adult friend or kin member, directing their hope towards an anticipated future in which Li's own children will inevitably align with their daughter (e.g., "will see it this way"). Even as it assertively proclaims the likelihood of this result, the enactment of anticipation as an act of "belief" here highlights the ongoing contingency of Li's heroism, which remains contested in China. Focusing primarily on the *personal* future in terms of Li's own children's future orientation to their father, this message underscores the spatiotemporal, embodied, and relational experience of Li as not only a hero but an intimate object of consideration in the everyday moral, relational, and affective life of this author. In doing so, finally, it enacts a nuanced form of scalar intimacy within which the figures of "engaged parent" and "child," both of which are enduring cultural chronotopes carrying heavy moral weight in China, align wholeheartedly with Li as a hero rather than a troublemaker.

A post in early May, over three months after Li's death, likewise figured Li as a moral hero, echoing a refrain that emerged almost immediately after Li's death

> Dr. Li is not a public intellectual seeking to save China, he is just an ophthalmologist, a young father. He first made a small brave move, and then a bigger brave move. (May 13, 2020)

This message, embedded within a longer thread in which participants debated Li's resemblance to national, political heroes in the past, directly and declaratively configures Li's personhood within the chronotopic landscape of person-types in China. Specifically, it distances Li from "public intellectuals" who are motivated by political ambition to "save China." Placing him in the role of being "just" an ophthalmologist and young father positions him, in other words, in a contrastively humble and dignified sociomoral position. This positioning then affords a reframing and scaling of his "moves" as acts of *bravery* as opposed to intentionally disruptive political acts. The act of warning his friends about a potentially deadly virus here arguably constitutes Li's initial "small brave move." His "bigger brave move," on the other hand, is more ambiguous, referring possibly to his choice to post his signed confession letter publicly on Weibo and/or his potentially incendiary comments referring to the overuse of state power and his "belief" that a healthy society should have more than "one kind of voice" (an indirect direct reference to the state). Positioning Li as a moral hero who aspired to nothing more than living as "just" an ordinary guy thus distinguishes Li's actions from those enacted by "public intellectuals" (e.g., troublemakers) in terms of both intent and character. The chronotopic impact of this frequently echoed declarative statement, furthermore, is arguably grounded in the flexible grammatical formulation of temporality in Chinese, a language that relies on context and additional semantic markers to express verb tense (Lin, 2003). In formulating Li's personhood using the existential "be" form (是 *shi*) with no specific indication of past or present tense, in other words, this oft-repeated message places Li Wenliang simultaneously in the past and the present in ways that afford a continued form of moral relationality to take shape amongst interlocutors.

In yet other posts, authors align with Li in ways that more explicitly relate to his (and thus their) positioning vis-à-vis the Chinese state. A message shared in early August, for example, responds to the news that the Medal of the Republic, the country's highest award, would not be awarded to Li Wenliang but, rather, to Zhong Nanshan, a renowned pulmonologist who has served as a leading advisor to the CCP throughout the COVID-19 crisis (Stanway and Pollard, 2020; see also Wade, 2021). Enacting scalar intimacy as a form of embodied resistance, the author here positions themselves in direct opposition to the state:

> The Medal of the Republic (共和国勋章 *Gongheguo xunzhang*) in my heart is awarded to you. Dr. Li, I will not forget. (August 4, 2020)

As noted above, memory is often considered a distinctly political sentiment in China (Roberts, 2018; Cao and Zeng, 2021). This includes the kinds of "correct collective memory" promoted by the state (Rudolph, 2020b) as well as the kinds of *refusals* of such correctness that are enacted by individuals such as this author. Indeed, writes Rudolph, "The only way to challenge official memory" is often "by preserving the humble memories of the individual" (2020b: NP). In this case, however, official memory is *preemptively* contested in the author's alignment with Li – addressed here as both "you" and "Dr. Li" – vis-à-vis a publicly articulated "anticipatory mode" in which they promise never to forget (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019). Reflecting as well as connecting to a broader community of netizens who enact a counter-hegemonic form of collective memory on Li's wall (Cao and Zeng, 2021), this message further underscores resistance as an intimate and embodied positioning of oneself in relation to the state. By asserting that they will award the Medal of the Republic to Li in their "heart," the author specifically enacts scalar intimacy in their formulation of authority as an embodied aspect of their innermost self that not only exceeds that of the state, but which will also endure into the future.

In multiple ways, then, the formulation of Li as a moral hero affords the opportunity for authors to enact a nuanced form of scalar intimacy that unsettles the chronotopic good citizen/bad dissident binary through which morality and immorality are often imagined in China. The animation of Li as a moral hero likewise invites participants, to engage in an emergent, collaborative process of recalibrating their ongoing relationship to "China" and "Chineseness." This is not always necessarily a total rescaling or full "rechronotopization" (Karimzad and Catedral 2021), however, nor does it always reflect a positioning that emerged only recently and in relation to Li Wenliang. The positioning of Li as a moral hero, rather, affords the co-construction of a unique public space-time within which scalar intimacy is only sometimes enacted as a complete opposition to the state. More frequently, scalar intimacy here is more tentative, seeking not complete opposition but rather engaging in an ongoing interrogation of dominant cultural chronotopes that operate within a strict binary of "good" and "evil." The formulation of Li as a moral hero functioned, in other words, to unsettle if not necessarily completely overturn dominant and normative cultural chronotopes, particularly chronotopes of the nation as a harmonious, happy home.

5. Formulating Li as a Kin Figure

Intense and personal identification with Li also leads, we observe in this section, to multiple instances within which Li is positioned not just as a national moral

hero, but also as a personal kin figure – often at the same time. This is accomplished in multiple semantic as well as pragmatic ways in the current dataset as well as in a large number of posts that have remained public (Rudolph 2020a, Zhou and Zhong 2021). The bulk of *all* posts on Li's wall are, for example, articulated in a format that is unusual with regards to comments embedded within massive, anonymous, and public social media threads. While this type of message normally does not warrant the designation of an explicit addressee, for example, most of the direct replies on the thread following Li's final post are constructed as *personal letters* addressed to Li. Many open by distinguishing that the message is meant for "Dr. Li," for example, addressing him with a term of respect that positions him as a personal mentor or teacher, both of which are recognizable as (fictive) kin figures in China (Kipnis, 1997). Li is also addressed with intimate terms simultaneously that likewise signal an intimate form of familiarity and respect, including "old fellow" (老乡 *Laoxiang*) or "Old Li" (老李 *Lao Li*). In other posts, authors adopt address explicit kinship terms, calling him, for example, "Elder Brother Li" (李哥 *Li Ge*) or "Elder Brother Wenliang" (文亮兄 *Wenliang Xiong*). Addressing Li in these ways, participants thus grant him the moral status of a real or fictive family member and/or a deeply respected elder or teacher who continues to occupy a proximal position of powerful, embodied importance in the lives of individual authors. Addressing Li as a kin member further instantiates the home chronotope

Across many posts, moreover, this relational framework for addressing Li is often paired with an intimate, personal greeting of some kind, e.g., "good morning" or "goodnight." Kin-like intimacy also inheres in the frequent "daily reports" in which authors bring Li up to speed on more personal events such as graduations, breakups, and challenges at work. Other posts offer updates on the weather, as well as events related to the ongoing pandemic in China or globally. Such reports often pragmatically formulate Li as if he continues to occupy a shared geographic and national space-time, enacting a form of care for him by "keeping him in the loop" so to speak. Within many such messages, authors often speak directly to Li as if he were a close confidante of some kind, whether a kin member or the kind of bosom-friend who is like kin (亲密朋友 *qinmi pengyou*). Such messages, we suggest, instantiate the home chronotope, enacting the relational structures that imply the existence of ongoing and mutual care between participants and Li Wenliang, as opposed to the state.

These seemingly mundane reports, of which there are thousands of examples throughout the year, often position Li as an entity who elicits of the kinds of embodied, daily care customarily reserved for those who one "worries for" (心疼 *xinteng*) in everyday life (Kipnis, 1997: Sundararajan, 2015). This is, importantly,

a continuous practice that continues as late as this message shared in December, 2020:

> Wenliang, the temperature has cooled here near me. I wonder how you are doing where you are. It must be warm like spring. Remember to add and subtract clothes. No matter what, people who are alive must be strong.
>
> (December 21, 2020)

Addressing Li using only his informal name, this author opens by positioning him as a close friend who continues to exist in both time and space. The space-time that he inhabits, however – formulated here as "where you are" – is immediately mapped as both distant and qualitatively distinct from that occupied by the author in terms of location as well as temperature and season. Specifically, Li Wenliang is discursively positioned as occupying a separate and *unknown* space-time that exists beyond the lived world. While the author explains that the weather has become cooler "here, near me," for example, they speculate that wherever Li is, "it must be warm like spring." Casting a deictic, spatiotemporal distinction between "here" and "there," this contrast also arguably formulates a *moral* distinction between "here" – where it is *cool* – and "there," where it is imagined to be *warm*. The possibility that the space he occupies might nevertheless be subject to temperature changes, however, evokes a recognizable form of concern. Despite the projected comfort and warmth of the location occupied by Li, the author thus admonishes Li to "add and subtract clothes" (加减衣物 *jiajian yifu*). This, notably, is a deeply familiar turn of phrase that pragmatically enacts concern by attending to a loved one's appropriate adjustment of attire in relation to the lived environment. It also enacts what Sundararajan describes as the kind of "constant worry and concern" for the embodied susceptibility of those whom one cares about (2015: 80). The pain of such worry, Sundararajan continues, "prompts the experiencer to do something all the time to make sure that the other is well taken care of" such that "the pain may be soothed momentarily by care" (2015: 80). Enacting care for Li, in this case, might be understood as a discursive process through which the author attempts to soothe their own pain and longing. This becomes more apparent in the following line, in which the author's intended interlocutor suddenly shifts as they issue a declarative statement indirectly addressing those positioned as co-inhabiting the lived world with the author (e.g., "people who are alive"). Noting that "no matter what" they "must be strong," the author formulates the space-time of the lived present as problematic, challenging, and/or precarious in ways that demand an unusual fortitude. Framed in general terms and ambiguous in terms of referent, this portion of the message thus maps a landscape of the living that is not only fraught with danger but requires both resolve and "strength" to endure.

In yet other messages, the discursive positioning of Li as a kin-figure affords a subtle but distinct formulation of oneself in the sociomoral landscape of the nation. In a melancholy message posted on March 26, for example, the author opens by deictically casting an implicit chronotopic contrast between heaven and earth. After situating Li in heaven, they nevertheless go on to position him as the closest confidantes in their own and many others lives:

> In heaven, over on that side, there is no suffering. Recently the peach blossoms have bloomed, but unfortunately you can't see it, Dr. Li. This is my China's Wailing Wall. I'm bothering you. Everyone speaks to you from their heart, all leaving you comments, sending you private messages. If [we] are unable to talk to you, who else is there to talk to? Maybe chatting with you can ease the pain in our hearts a little bit. (March 26, 2020)

Launching directly into a simultaneously spatial and moral declaration that "over on that side, there is no suffering," they go on, however, to emphasize the temporally situated, natural beauty of the peach blossoms that have recently blossomed. This is immediately followed by the conjunction "but," which works here to convey a distinct pathos regarding the fact that Li – addressed here as "Dr. Li" – is "unfortunately" unable to appreciate this beauty. Li is thus figured here as an intimate whose absence is experienced as a diminishing of the author's own enjoyment of the world. An abrupt shift follows, however, with the author moving on to issue a metapragmatic, locative assertion that names the present digital space-time. "This is my China's Wailing Wall," they say. The expression of intimacy and ownership here is notably multi-tiered, pointing simultaneously to the author's sense of national ownership as well as their intimate and relational sense of identification with and sense of ownership of the wall itself (Pritzker, In Press; see also Liang, 2016; Serikkaliyeva et al., 2019). They shift again, here, however, addressing Li directly with the informal "you" form and expressing concern for the ways in which they might be "bothering" him. They nevertheless continue engaging dialogically with Li, topicalizing the discursive intimacy that prevails in the space, where "everyone speaks to you from their heart." Pointing to the ways in which participation on Li's wall affords "a symbolic but firm relationship of mutual support – 'we' joined in a relationship" (Cao and Zeng, 2021: 11), the author here adopts a distinct affective-moral stance in their discursive formulation of a rhetorical question ("if [we] are unable to talk to you, who else is there to talk to?"). This grammatical structure, which invites a negative response, emerges as a form of self-disclosure. It also suggests an acute metapragmatic awareness, however, that many participants turn to Li not only as an intimate friend, but as the *only* person to whom they talk to ease "the pain in our hearts" (if only a little bit). The author here thus enacts scalar intimacy by instantiating their closeness with Li (and oth-

ers on the page) at the same time as they express the sense of distance they feel from the social and political worlds causing them pain. Like the previous example, this message also orients to Li as if he still exists.

The previous messages demonstrate the enactment of a nuanced form of scalar intimacy that is as much grounded in the discursive formulation of Li as a loved one for whom one worries as a moral strategy for positioning oneself in relation to the current sociopolitical climate that Li indexes. Messages figuring Li as a kin member thus contribute to the persistence of Li Wenliang as an interlocutor who – though he never responds – continues to "live" amongst participants. The structure for interacting with intimate entities who are no longer living here arguably draws momentum from a longstanding and familiar form of ritual communication between the living and the dead in China. Communication with deceased ancestors and other "spirit beings" or *guishen* (鬼神), as Teiser (1996) explains, is often enacted with the goal of appeasing one's nonliving ancestors so that they do not become the kind of vengeful or "hungry" ghosts that wreak havoc in the world of the living (1996: 27; see also Gardner, 1996; Yang, 2020). According to the philosopher, Zhu Xi (1130–1200 BCE), this relationship, specifically, is characterized by the kind of "influence and response" (感格 *gan ge*) that pertains especially across the "blood and pulse" or *qi* (气) of genetically related individuals (Gardner, 1996: 116). The vast majority (if not all) participants on his Weibo are not genetically related to Li, however. Positioning him as kin thus arguably constitutes an expansion of ritual relationality such that it grows to include the *collective* body-self constituting an imagined "nation-family" (国家*guojia*) of upright (Han) citizens. This occurs through scalar moves that draw together the intimate, personal experience of authors with more broadly collective experience in the nation.

6. Formulating Li as a Deity

Several examples in the previous sections underscore the ways in which participants on the Wailing Wall speak to Li as if he continues to live on in the here-and-now. Casting him in the role of moral hero or kin figure, Li becomes a kind of silent interlocutor who is chronotopically positioned as occupying a space-time of the "good" to which participants can orient towards in ways that afford nuanced critiques of the current sociopolitical landscape in China, often in implicit ways that do not read as overt criticisms. In this sense, one might say, Li becomes like a personally relatable god with whom people communicate their most intimate experiences and desires (Corwin, 2012; Luhrmann, 2012). Indeed, as we discuss in this final section, Li is also frequently formulated as a spiritual figure or *deity*. Numerous messages here adopt an explicit religious register orienting to Li as a

god-like figure or deity to whom they can pray as well as appeal for "blessings." In so doing, we suggest, participants enact scalar intimacy through the chronotopic mapping of their own vulnerability (Butler et al. 2016).

In a post in late March, for example, the author draws upon a temporal frame to describe the ways in which their engagement with Li's wall has fundamentally shifted their understanding of the needs and desires of Chinese people:

> Dr. Li, they say that your Weibo is a Wailing Wall for the Chinese. For the first time, I have deeply understood the desire for repentance and prayer in this nation – or it is a kind of redemption and relief. (March 23, 2020)

Beginning with an address to Dr. Li, the author goes to invoke the reported speech of popular discourses framing Li's Weibo as "a Wailing Wall for the Chinese." Scalar intimacy is enacted here as an intimate appraisal of the collective affective response enacted by *others* on Li's page, an appraisal that has moved this author to re-evaluate their personal understanding of themselves in relation to the experiences, desires, and needs, of others in the nation. They continue, here, to offer insight into the ways in which witnessing the emergence of this space has personally impacted them. Specifically, they depict an embodied and affective shift in which they have, for the first time, "deeply understood" what they frame as "the desire or hope (期望 *qiwang*) for repentance and prayer." The messages and interactions they have witnessed on Li's wall are then described as offering "a kind of redemption and relief (解脱 *jietuo*)" that the author assesses as much needed in China. Positioning themselves in the figure of witness or observer – within what remains a direct message to Li – they simultaneously adopt a position of humility and intimacy with the collectively imagined nation, whose shared desires co-constitute them as a nation-family.

Another example from early June, as in several previously discussed examples, begins by invoking the chronotopic contrast between "heaven" and the space/time in which ordinary Chinese citizens live (e.g., "earth"). Speaking to Li as "spirit in heaven," this author draws upon a Christian register, however, and goes on to orient to Li as an other-than-human entity who has the capacity to offer "blessings" to "ordinary" Chinese people:

> Dr. Li, spirit in heaven, please bless us ordinary Chinese people. (June 9, 2020)

Positioning themselves as part of a national collective of "ordinary Chinese people," the author thus formulates the message as a request in which they ask politely (and piously) for Li's blessing. The chronotopic contrast between "spirit in heaven" and "ordinary Chinese people," however, also enacts a nuanced form of scalar intimacy in which the author draws themselves into a collective of "ordi-

nary Chinese people" who are particularly vulnerable and who therefore need blessings from an other-than-human force or entity. Worthy of note, here, is how this chronotopic framing directly contradicts the largely secular perspective dominating Chinese Marxist education (Kipnis, 1997). By placing Li in the role of "spirit in heaven," the author thus enacts scalar intimacy by distancing themselves, very subtly, from the central narrative of the CCP (Johnson, 2017). The attribution of god-like powers to Li Wenliang moreover, further binds such distance by figuring him as an entity whose very existence as a deity came about as a result of betrayal by the state. The intimacy enacted with this formal request for a collective blessing, finally, contributes directly to the pragmatic co-construction of the immediate space-time (the "here-and-now") of Li's wall as an intimate home-space or a space of refuge similar to a church or temple.

Another message in which Li is engaged as a deity, posted in September, demonstrates a similar scalar move. The author of this post expands upon the widespread orientation to Li as a kind of "god of the people," however, by engaging with the sociopolitical implications of a spiritual transformation that they frame as having occurred in China:

> Dr. Li, you have become everyone's belief (信仰 *xinyang*). Don't foreigners say that China has no religion? You have overthrown them, [please] be well.
>
> (September 16, 2020)

This message, addressed initially to Li Wenliang, begins by telling him that he has "become everyone's belief." The author thus positions Li as having evoked a transformative shift away from what many Chinese citizens themselves understand to be a lamentable lack of religious faith (Johnson, 2017). Going on to cast a rhetorical question that demonstrates an acute awareness of popular western depictions of Chinese citizens as morally inferior due to lack of religious faith. As demonstrated by Nute (2020), for example, such chronotopic contrasts allow American politicians to position themselves "as the 'godful' progenitors of truth, goodness, and morality" (Nute 2020: 2). In framing Li as having become everyone's belief, they speak directly to this xenophobic and ethnographic casting, enacting complex and layered scalar intimacies that draw them at once towards the notion that religiosity constitutes a marker of progress as well as towards the widely circulated casting of China as a collective body perpetually in competition with the U.S. (see, e.g., Zaidi and Saud, 2020). The author thus applauds Li for "overthrowing" or disrupting, overturning, and subverting (颠覆 *dianfu*) foreigners' moral characterizations by inspiring what amounts to a shared religious faith. Scalar intimacy is thus enacted here in the author's chronotopic formulation of Chineseness not only vis-à-vis Li Wenliang, but also vis-à-vis "foreigners." Throughout the entire message, however, the author speaks directly to Li, closing by offering him a kind

of "congratulations" and wishing him well, thus instantiating the casual, kin-like relationship evident in the previous section.

The formulation of Li as a deity–like instances that orient to him as a moral hero and/or kin member – afford the co-construction of the space-time on his wall as a distinct space of emotional but also sociomoral, political refuge. Indeed, the very designation of Li's wall as "China's Wailing Wall" is often explicitly conceptualized in relation to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Many netizens here compare the scale of their grief, as well their digital "pilgrimage" to Li's page, to that of Jews who visit the site of the former Temple Mount. Several participants explicitly refer to Li's wall, moreover, as a "church" for Chinese people to engage in "goodness" and "kindness." Li's wall is often elaborated, in such posts, as a spiritual space-time that satisfies what Zhang (2019: 153) observes is often framed as a spiritual search for "a home for our soul" amongst middle-class Chinese citizens. Like other messages discussed throughout this paper, moreover, formulations of Li's wall as a spiritual space often deploy a nuanced chronotopic contrast between Li's wall and other national/cultural space-times that are less morally and spiritually nourishing. Posts that orient to Li's wall as a religious space, finally, further demonstrate the ways in which authors variably conceptualize Li as a force that has shifted their experience of themselves as part of a collective nation-family.

7. Concluding Reflections

Throughout this article, we have demonstrated how authors of messages posted on China's Wailing Wall enacted scalar intimacy in responding to the sudden shock of Li Wenliang's death and following events. They did so in part, we have shown, by positioning Li Wenliang as a moral hero, a kin figure, and/or a deity to which they continued to relate. As they positioned Li in these roles, moreover, authors enacted scalar intimacy by moving closer to or further from dominant cultural chronotopes situating them within the national present. This both reflected and reconfigured their experience of themselves as part of a collective nation-family. The formulation of Li as a moral hero, for example, often demanded a reconsidered positioning towards and within the kinds of moral binaries promoted by the (singular) "voice" of the state. It therefore afforded a distinctly ethical reflection on the sociomoral landscape of the nation-family as it is commonly narrated. Even in the most seemingly "mundane" posts that formulated Li as a kin figure, authors enacted a nuanced form of scalar intimacy by simply aligning with Li Wenliang as an intimate other who deserved better care than he received from the state. Relating to Li as a deity-figure, finally, invited the formulation of collective vulnerability and desire by multiple authors. Underscoring

the authors' chronotopic formulation of their ongoing relationship to affectively and morally salient figure(s) in China, our analysis likewise highlights how figures of personhood – through both explicit and implied contrast – serve as complex, indexical orienting devices that "place" speakers *in* the world as well they afford nuanced critiques *of* the world.

Chronotopically situating Li as a moral hero, a kin figure, and/or a saint, in short, threw authors into a position of distance from hegemonic national chronotopes situating people in a symbiotic relationship of mutual care vis-à-vis the Chinese state. Our analysis thus offers insight into the ways in which collective crises have the capacity to (but do not necessarily) motivate a complex discursive and relational process through which interlocutors grapple with shifts in their felt experience of nationhood and/or "culture" as they are narrated in dominant cultural chronotopes. As Pritzker and Perrino admit, understanding the effects of such moves over time in the lives of individuals or collectives requires studies that extend beyond particular "speech events" (Wortham and Reyes 2015). We nevertheless suggest, in conclusion, that this analysis contributes to a growing literature problematizing the binary distinction between the "political" and "personal" in China and beyond. Situated enactments of scalar intimacy as presented here, finally, speak to the question, in existing literatures, of whether to engage with chronotopes as fixed or emergent and constantly shifting in particular interactions (see, e.g., De Fina, forthcoming). Scalar intimacy, specifically, suggests how dominant cultural chronotopes are *both* stable and enduring, if not necessarily "fixed" or immovable, *and* inherently unstable (Sabsay 2016, Pritzker and Perrino 2020; Wong et al. 2021).

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