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# "What's going on with my China?": Political subjectivity, scalar inquiry, and the magical power of Li Wenliang

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## Abstract

This article examines how the death of Li Wenliang, in February 2020, served as an affordance for Chinese netizens to engage with their intimate sense of themselves as political subjects through the interrogative process of scalar inquiry. Li, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital who was sanctioned by Chinese authorities in 2019 for warning friends about the virus, was also an eminently normative and successful Han Chinese citizen who many saw as a reflection of themselves. His persecution, public humiliation, and death thus indexed the vulnerability of even the most compliant subjects and triggered an unprecedented public response that included both grief and outrage. Although largely censored within hours, this response continued to emerge throughout the year in a public mega-thread on his Weibo "Wailing Wall." This article draws on an alternative archive of censored messages on Li's Weibo page—usually described as an affective, apolitical space—to demonstrate how the Wailing Wall also becomes a unique sociomoral space in which people collaboratively reflect upon their sense of themselves as embodied subjects. Scalar inquiry, I suggest, thus emerges as a continual, collaborative, and simultaneously personal and political process of interrogating citizenship and nationhood vis-à-vis the remembered past, the experienced present, and the anticipated future.

KEYWORDS
China, COVID-19, Li Wenliang, political subjectivity, scalar intimacy

## Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo la muerte de Li Wenliang, en febrero de 2020, sirvió como una posibilidad para los internautas chinos de involucrarse con su sentido íntimo de sí mismos como sujetos políticos a través de un proceso interrogativo. Li, un oftalmólogo del Wuhan Central Hospital quien fue sancionado por autoridades chinas en 2019 por advertir a sus amigos acerca del virus, fue también un ciudadano chino Han eminentemente normativo y exitoso a quien muchos vieron como un reflejo de sí mismos. Su persecución, humillación y muerte de este modo indexó la vulnerabilidad de aún los más sumisos sujetos y provocó una respuesta pública sin precedentes que incluyó tanto el dolor como la indignación. Aunque en gran parte censurado en horas, la respuesta continuó emergiendo a través del año en una megacadena en su "Muro de

  

los Lamentos" en Weibo. Este artículo se basa en un archivo alternativo de los mensajes censurados en la página de Li en Weibo –usualmente descrito como un espacio afectivo, apolítico– para demostrar cómo el Muro de los Lamentos también se convierte en un espacio sociomoral único en el cual las personas reflexionan colaborativamente sobre su sentido de sí mismos como sujetos corporeizados. La investigación escalar, sugiero, emerge así como un proceso simultáneamente político y personal, continuo y colaborativo de interrogar ciudadanía y sentido de nación en relación con el pasado recordado, el presente experimentado y el futuro anticipado. [China, COVID-19, Li Wenliang, subjetividad política, intimidad escalar]

"The issues revealed by massive disasters exist in 'normal' times, but disasters dramatize them and give us an opportunity to scrutinize them in a much more intensive way than in everyday settings"

—Xu Bin

"This is the first time I have been shocked by the power of someone's personality. I can't believe it. A person who has died has the magical power to attract thousands of Chinese people . . . to open their hearts and to speak freely . . . such breathtaking truth, goodness, and beauty."

—Anonymous post on Li's Wailing Wall (March 19, 2020)

When rumors of the spread of a deadly new virus were officially confirmed, the temporal flow of a nation in the midst of usually boisterous Spring Festival celebrations came to a screeching halt. Millions of Chinese citizens, unexpectedly confined to their homes, flocked online for information as well as a sense of connection in a world transformed by crisis. Hundreds of thousands tuned in, for example, to the 24/7 livestream of the state-sponsored construction of two temporary hospitals just outside the city of Wuhan. Many also actively participated in the accompanying chat, where construction vehicles were personified, transformed into adored celebrities who evoked empathy, care, and support from citizens (Wong et al. 2021). As citizens took up the role of adoring "fans" of the celebrity vehicles—most famously "Baby Forklift"—they co-created an atmosphere of play that left little room for critique (Wong et al. 2021, 14). This article focuses on a very different online mood that began to take shape—just a few days after hospital construction was complete—when Li Wenliang, a physician at Wuhan Central Hospital, was pronounced dead.

Li, citizens quickly learned, had been quietly sanctioned by police and hospital officials for warning friends and colleagues about the possible identification of a novel and deadly virus in December 2019. He had remained quiet until the end of January, however, when he was first diagnosed with COVID-19. When he died a week later, millions of Chinese citizens flocked to Li's public Weibo page, which quickly became known as China's "Wailing Wall,"[1,2] to express their grief and outrage (Li and Taylor 2020; Pritzker 2020; Rudolph 2020a; Wade 2021). In contrast to the mood on the hospital livestream, the tone on Li's wall was somber and charged. As I discuss here, participants here grappled with a range of intense emotions and engaged in a collaborative and emergent process of interrogation that I examine as a form of *scalar inquiry*.

Scalar inquiry, specifically, is a type of "scalar intimacy" (Pritzker and Perrino 2020). Sabina Perrino and I describe scalar intimacy as a dialogic process through which people continually and collaboratively formulate their embodied relationship with cultural ideologies, events, and other people (365). Tracking scalar intimacy in interaction, we suggest, involves examining the narrative strategies through which people dialogically "move towards, or away from, certain culturally situated ideas and beliefs" (368). As a methodological intervention grounded in semiotic anthropology's commitment to the pragmatic emergence of meaning in interaction (Goodwin 2018; Nakassis 2016), the observation of scalar intimacy in particular encounters demonstrates the relational and participatory ways in which people continually engage in "scale-making projects" that shape their sense of place, time, and direction (Carr and Lempert 2016; Gal 2016; Gal and Irvine 2019). As interlocutors take up particular roles vis-à-vis one another, for example, they continually and collaboratively enact relationality and personhood vis-à-vis established scales of distinction, or "cultural chronotopes" that situate them as specific kinds of moral beings in both space and time (Agha 2007; see also Bakhtin 1981). Cultural chronotopes are thus not merely ideas or ideologies but rather emerge as intimate, phenomenological orienting devices (Ahmed 2007) or "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977) shaping specific interactions and simultaneously structuring intimate relationships with friends, family, and coworkers as well as orientations toward nationhood, culture, and society. Scalar intimacy attends to political subjectivity as a relationally co-emergent understanding of one's affective-relational body-self in relation to real or imagined social, spatial, and temporal trajectories.

In China, scalar intimacy includes the enactment and somatic entrenchment of dominant cultural chronotopes, including (to name just a few) the notions of "home" (家 *jia*), "culture" (文化 *wenhua*), and "harmonious society" (和谐社会 *hexie shehui*) (see, e.g., Xie 2021; Yang 2018). As Wong et al. (2021, 4) argue, for example, the "cutification" (萌化 *menghua*) of construction vehicles during the hospital livestream hinged upon the enactment of scalar intimacy "by associating different types of relationships—parents and children, fans and idols, and citizens and the nation—through verbal conventions of interpersonal affection." As a participatory process enacted by individual speakers, scalar intimacy thus highlights an embodied, affective way of engaging with cultural forms and ideologies as well as others in ways that structure the immediate interaction and guide relationships over time (Pritzker and Hu 2022). Scalar intimacy, importantly, requires an active and engaged form of participation that is inherently relational and agentive, though not necessarily emancipatory or liberating (Pritzker and Perrino 2020, 383; see also Delfino 2021). As it is developed here, scalar *inquiry*, however, emerges as a form of scalar intimacy within which people inhabit an inherently unstable and uncertain process within which participants interrogate normative relationships, roles, and ideologies that otherwise bind them.

Scalar inquiry, specifically, centers how people question structures, forms of personhood, and relationships otherwise entrenched through scalar intimacy. Such questioning, in theory, can emerge among individuals at any time. The kind of scalar inquiry that emerged on Li Wenliang's Weibo page, however, points to the kind of collective scrutiny that becomes possible during large-scale disasters, when complex social issues and otherwise hidden "public secrets" (Hillenbrand 2020) become available for collaborative interrogation (Xu 2017, 23; see also Zigon 2008). The outbreak of COVID-19, Li's death, and the events that followed served, for many Chinese citizens, as a call to interrogate the political present and to experiment with tentatively (re)positioning themselves in relation to unfolding events and personal as well as national pasts, presents, and possible futures.

Answering calls for more nuanced investigations of citizens' engagement with state rhetoric in China (Latham 2007; Roberts 2018), this article demonstrates a form of questioning that is not often visible in China. Based on the analysis of posts and interactions preserved in a specialized archive of messages deemed controversial or at risk of deletion (see below), my analysis foregrounds how questions about temporality, nationhood, and relational selfhood emerged, over the course of a year, in this intermittent yet enduring dialogue on the margins of Li's page. As participants related to what the author in the second epigraph above framed as Li's "magical power" to bring people together "to open their hearts and speak freely," I demonstrate how they often posed questions interrogating the boundaries between what is personal and what is public—as well as what is sayable and what is not—in China. Participants also, I show, engaged in scalar inquiry in interrogating their very sense of themselves as embodied, relational agents located within and along a shared and emergent spatiotemporal and moral national trajectory. Though focused on China, my analysis offers scalar inquiry as a cross-subfield investigation of political subjectivity as a simultaneously embodied, affective, and discursive process. Often hinging upon chronotopic contrasts (e.g., between past and present, surface and depth, "our society" and the rest of the world), scalar inquiry constitutes a theoretical and methodological intervention that invites observers to witness the emergence of political subjectivity in asynchronous yet intimate interaction.

## WHO IS LI WENLIANG?

Asking who Li Wenliang "is" arguably is a provocative question that might best be left open (Figure 1). In detailing his story here, however, I demonstrate how another appropriate answer to the question involves recognizing that Li Wenliang is a potent semiotic index (Peirce 1992) whose meaning emerges differently in situated encounters. For people in the United States, Li's name—for those who recognize it—often points to authoritarianism and the sociopolitical Otherness of China. For many Chinese citizens, on the other hand, Li Wenliang is a potent index of a simultaneously personal and political form of betrayal that provokes the kind of embodied scrutiny described here as scalar inquiry.

Li's existence as "just an ordinary guy," in particular, afforded this personal sense of identification, at least among middle-class Han citizens. Many were thus moved to relate to Li as if he were an intimate friend and confidante, an aspect of themselves, and even a moral and/or spiritual force whose "magical power" had destabilized and transformed their fundamental experience of themselves, others, and the nation (Pritzker 2020; Pritzker and Hu 2022; Rudolph 2020a, 2020b; Wade 2021). However, it is critical to highlight that Li was *not* just any "ordinary guy." A 34-year-old, cisgender, ethnically Han, heteronormative and successful physician, Li was arguably an *extra*ordinary guy whose embodiment of multiple cultural and gendered ideals in Chinese society (see, e.g., Wong 2020; Xie 2021 ) stood in stark contrast to the imagined deviance of political dissidents, feminists, and others whose "quality" (素质 *suzhi*) is in some way tarnished by ethnicity, gender, class, or marital status (Cheng 2019; Lin 2017). As I have previously observed (Pritzker 2020), many of the memes and images circulated immediately after his death demonstrate how Li's extraordinary normativity afforded an intimate form of identification among many Chinese citizens in which they understood Li as *themselves*. Li's condemnation and death, in other words, immediately emerged as an index of the vulnerability of even those whose bodies and everyday lives fell "within the established rules of order" (Fikes 2021 , n.p.), and many Chinese citizens experienced his death as a personal form of betrayal by a state that has (at least publicly) built its credibility on the enactment of "kindly care" (关爱 *guanai*) (Zhang 2020).

The intimate politics of Li Wenliang were also infinitely complex in terms of the ways in which they were scaled more broadly to the issue of freedom of speech in China. People throughout China recognized Li as having enacted a kind of mundane heroism in speaking up to warn those close to him about the risks presented by a mysterious new illness. Li was also broadly applauded, however, for having bravely spoken truth to power, both in sharing his story publicly and in issuing the statement during his interview on January 30 that "a healthy society should not have

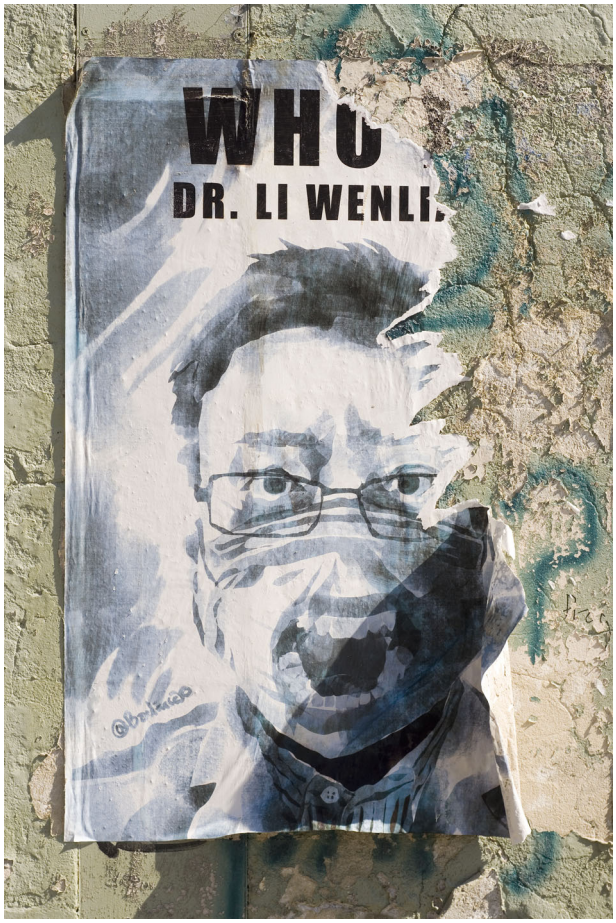


**FIGURE 1** Partially damaged picture of Dr. Li Wenliang on the wall poster. (Credit: Petr Vodička)[3] [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

more than one kind of voice" (Qin et al. 2020).[4] Posts linked to the hashtag #wewantfreedomofspeech, often accompanied by artistically rendered images of Li with his mask transformed into stretches of barbed wire or replaced with a large hand, immediately began to circulate in China and beyond (see Figure 2).

Technically guaranteed by Article 35 of the Chinese constitution, freedom of speech in China is, in practice, frequently curtailed by legally entrenched prohibitions from saying or doing anything that conflicts with state messaging (Palmer 2010; Hu 2014). Public censorship, as demonstrated throughout this article, is only one aspect of the broader issue. Indeed, as Roberts (2018) details, China's "porous" system of state censorship operates primarily through the dual processes of "friction" and "flooding"[5] rather than directly through the incitement of fear in citizens afraid to publicly criticize the government. The CCP thus allows and even welcomes a certain amount of public critique, a form of tolerance that affords close monitoring of public sentiments by state actors, who can respond to specific issues before they inspire large-scale collective action (Roberts 2018, 145), such as the protests against COVID restrictions that eventually took shape in 2022. While many online critiques were deleted after just a few hours, posts framing Li's silencing as an egregious example of institutionalized injustice continued to circulate for weeks after his death. These outcries, in fact, led to an unprecedented response in which, on March 19, 2020, the state posthumously restored Li's public record, apologized to his family, and condemned the officers responsible for his persecution (Collier 2020; Niewenhuis 2020). While this satisfied some, many viewed this response as "a limited compromise" (Cao and Zeng 2021, 15). Many posts in the days following Li's redemption framed the state's response as a second form of betrayal that merely scapegoated specific individuals rather than interrogating the broader structures of unfreedom that likely motivated their actions.

Though many such interrogations were removed from public sites, Li's Weibo page—to the surprise of many participants—remained live throughout the weeks following his death. Indeed, Li's Wailing Wall, described as an apolitical space where participants flock to collectively untangle the embodied "knot" in their hearts (Fang 2020, 179), remains live as of this writing. Several journalists and scholars observing interactions on Li's wall note that messages consist predominantly of "commonplace, cordial, loving messages written to a trusted friend" (Rudolph 2020a, n.p.). Li's wall has also been approached, however, as a space of political resistance in which participants enact a counterhegemonic form of collective memory

**FIGURE 2** Collage of various images circulated online after Li Wenliang' s death. (Courtesy *What's on Weibo*)[6] [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

(Cao and Zeng 2021; see also Rudolph 2020b). As I discuss here, the scalar inquiry enacted on Li's wall affords a perspective on the site as a unique space-time within which a Chinese counterpublic emerges in a collaborative interrogation of Chinese society in both spatial and temporal terms.

It is critical to highlight, however, that this article is based on an archive of censored messages and messages deemed to be at risk of deletion by state censors. The archive was established and is maintained by *China Digital Times* (CDT), an organization whose explicit commitment is to preserve "content that has been or is in danger of being censored in China[7]." The CDT archive, gathered by hand by CDT's Tony Hu on a daily basis and consisting of roughly 10,000 posts (see Pritzker and Hu 2022), offers neither a representative nor a generalizable analysis of discourse on Li's wall. Rather, the archive provides what might be framed as a glimpse into a kind of temporary community that formed in a quickly disappearing yet continuous conversation that took shape on the margins of Li's wall between March 2020 and February 2021.[8] Such messages, it is also important to note, often emerged in bursts of activity corresponding to key dates and events over the course of the year following Li's death (see Table 1), thus emerging as a long-term conversation—and contestation—that arguably contributed, over time, to the large-scale protests against the CCP's handling of COVID-19 that erupted throughout China in 2022 (Feng 2022; Hall, Horwitz, and Pollard 2022)

Of the roughly 10,000 posts included in the CDT archive, only 300 messages evidenced some form of questioning. Such questions were sometimes articulated in relation to one of the specific events listed in Table 1. More frequently, however, messages explicitly or implicitly addressed the accumulation of local, national, and global events. They also often referenced personal circumstances, such as the death of a pet, an upcoming exam, or struggles in an intimate relationship, many of which did not directly involve Li but nevertheless moved participants to turn toward him and the community on his page. Whatever their specific content, the bulk of such questions demonstrated forms of scalar inquiry in which the line separating "personal" issues (intimate relationships, embodied experience, etc.) from "political" issues (national rhetoric, public spaces, etc.) became blurred as participants engaged in a collaborative investigation of their place in the space-time of the Chinese nation. As presented in the following sections, scalar inquiry in these messages included: (1) open-ended questions centering the experiential present; (2) personal questions centering the experiential present in relation to Chinese society; (3) a range of questions centering the feelings of isolation authors were experiencing in the broader social present; and (4) questions orienting to the unknown future of Chinese society. The examples, each authored by distinct participants, are listed in chronological order in Tables 2–6. To preserve confidentiality, all examples are presented solely in English (my translations) rather than in the original Chinese. My translations also exclude mention of the gender of particular participants, and I do not include their Weibo handles. Though each message was posted in the past, I adopt the present tense in my analysis. My aim here is not to portray an enduring ethnographic present but rather to accurately represent the profound urgency of queries that scaled, often instantaneously, from the personal to the national and back again.

## INTERROGATING THE PRESENT

While it is impossible to assume that all messages enacting scalar inquiry on Li's wall are authored by individuals who were previously naïve about injustice in China, Table 2 offers several examples of open-ended interrogations foregrounding the kinds of temporal disjuncture that generated a

**TABLE 1** Timeline of events, including significant events leading to spikes of activity on Li Wenliang's Weibo page, 2019–2020

| Date | Event(s) |
|---|---|
| 12/30/2019 | Li sends photo, obtained from his colleague Dr. Ai Fen, depicting an anonymous chest X-ray demonstrating a mysterious SARS-like, pneumonia-like illness to friends and family. |
| 12/31/2019 | Li is called to the local police station, where he willingly signs a document confessing to "rumor-mongering." |
| 1/10/2020 | Li develops symptoms of COVID-19. |
| 1/23/2020 | Wuhan is placed on city-wide lockdown. |
| 1/27/2020 | Temporary hospital construction begins. |
| 1/30/2020 | Li diagnosed with COVID-19; shares story on Weibo. |
| 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 (Kuo 2020). |
| 3/19/2020 | Li's status reinstated; Wuhan officials sanctioned. |
| 4/2/2020 | Li officially named a "martyr"; posthumously awarded the May Fourth Medal . |
| 4/4/2020 | Qingingming Festival (National Memorial Day). |
| 4/8/2020 | Wuhan lockdown lifted. |
| 5/7/2020 | US lawmakers propose renaming the street outside of the Chinese Embassy in Washington, DC, "Li Wenliang Square" (France Press 2020). |
| 6/12/2020 | Li's wife gives birth to their second child, a son. |
| 6/19/2020 | Millions of comments on Li's final post mysteriously disappear. |
| 9/8/2020 | Li is excluded from official CCP recognition of role models in China's fight against COVID. |

**TABLE 2** Interrogating the Present

| | Message | Date |
|---|---|---|
| (a) | "My eyes are sore from crying. What kind of society is this after all? Why are people who tell the truth suppressed while those who follow the leader are lifted up? I really don't understand!" | 3/15/2020 |
| (b) | "What kind of country is this? What kind of era is all of this? Are freedom of public opinion and democratic supervision forever just slogans?" | 3/28/2020 |
| (c) | "When I was young, didn't everyone tell us that heroes are to be remembered and praised? How did you grow up? The world has changed." | 4/25/2020 |
| (d) | "What's going on with my China? Under the glorious surface, why do all these things keep happening that make people's hearts run cold?" | 7/2/2020 |
| (e) | "I don't know what's wrong with [this] society. It seems to be sick. The way that people relate to one another feels off-flavor . . . Dr. Li, would you say society is progressing or not?" | 1/31/2021 |

sense of disorientation and disillusionment in many citizens. The experience of rupture, these examples illustrate, called many to interrogate the political present that they were collectively embedded (and embodied) within.

Example 2(a), for instance, was posted in mid-March. Opening with a description of their embodied-emotional experience, the author states that their eyes are "sore from crying." Suggesting a period of extended grief, they go on to ask, "What kind of society is this after all?" A proximal deictic ("this") situates them in the midst of Chinese society, while their temporal marker "after all" indicates an evaluative shift of some kind. Linking their immense grief to this shift, this frame situates the spatiotemporal present as revealing an enduring reality that had only recently begun to become visible to them. Foregrounding the tension between the ways in which truth-telling is suppressed while conformity is rewarded, they proceed to formulate an enduring present within which the scales of sociomoral logic are seemingly inverted. They close by distancing themselves from this environment by asserting dismay and lack of understanding, thus enacting scalar inquiry as an affect-laden interrogation of the embodied, affective self within the present.

In 2(b), another participant opens with an explicit interrogation of what is framed as a habitual spatiotemporal national present ("this country"), enacting scalar intimacy as a form of scalar inquiry by placing themselves within an immediate spatiotemporal and sociopolitical landscape that provokes a sense of disbelief as well as distrust. The author then questions specific forms of political rhetoric promoted by the CCP, centering the widely propagated notions of "freedom of public opinion" and "democratic supervision" (由民主监督 *you minzhu jiandu*). Both of these, it is worth noting, are frequently drawn upon by the state to portray a government that emerges "from the people" (Han 2021). Situating these principles within

**TABLE 3** Personal Queries

| | Message | Date |
|---|---|---|
| (a) | "I am suffocated with nowhere to speak. The epidemic has eased. . . . [My] child asked me who Li Wenliang was, but I was speechless. I don't know how to be proud of being Chinese. I don't know how to explain to [my] child that the Chinese nation is based on benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom, faith and virtue. I don't know how to explain the relationship between China and these times that lack joy" | 5/13/2020 |
| (b) | "Old fellow, come here to talk before going to bed. I bought a ticket to return home, but I don't know if I can go back smoothly. I don't even know if I choose to give up my current high-paying executive job or go back to realize my ideal of contributing to China. I have seen too much news of life and death recently. I sigh that the world is impermanent. . . . Any country needs whistleblowers, and what you said, a healthy nation shouldn't have only the sound of one voice, I hope you will be well there." | 7/10//2020 |

an enduring present within which they are questioned as being "forever just slogans," however, the author enacts scalar inquiry as they interrogate the (lack of) sincerity of these principles. Posted just over a week after Li's official redemption by the state, moreover, this message offers evidence for ways in which the state's response constituted an additional form of betrayal that motivated scalar inquiry among this and many other authors.

Posted in late April, example 2(c) underscores how participants engaged with broader debates about Li's legitimacy as a "hero" (Niewenhuis 2020). This post thus emphasizes a personal perspective on the ways that the present sociomoral orientation indicated in such debates deviates, for this author, from the lived and remembered past. They orient, specifically, toward a remembered past in which "everyone" aligned with the moral idea of actively and positively remembering heroes. Going on to inquire about how others on the site had grown up, they seem to leave room for the possibility that their own experience was unique. In asking the question, however, they pragmatically convey a sense of disjuncture between the past and the experiential, relational present. This discrepancy is centered in the following statement, in which the author situates themselves in a world that "has changed."

Example (2d), posted in July, consists of the full post cited in the title of this article. Opening with a scalar inquiry that deploys a widely promoted, state-supported formulation of China as "my China" (我的中国 *wode Zhongguo*) (Liang 2016), they ask, "What's going on with my China?" Alongside previous examples, the question underscores how Li's death was only the beginning of an ongoing series of events that continually moved citizens to question their relationship to the society emerging around them. The author then offers a richly spatial and chronotopic casting that contrasts China's "glorious surface" with a more troubling reality that seems to continually emerge. Asking why "all these things keep happening that make people's hearts run cold," they situate the evidence for this rupture at simultaneously personal and public scales. Alongside the other examples presented here, this post demonstrates how scalar inquiry, as a practice that endures long past the immediate crisis of Li's death, affords a collaborative investigation of participants' sense of themselves as political subjects situated in and along a shared spatiotemporal and moral national trajectory.

Further pointing to the sense of disorientation that motivates scalar inquiry as cumulative is example 2(e), posted nearly a year after Li's death. Also demonstrating scalar inquiry as a strategy through which questions at the scale of society are filtered through specific embodied experiences and encounters, this message begins with the author articulating a sense of confusion about "what's wrong with [this] society." Society, they continue, "seems to be sick" in some unidentifiable way. Casting this assessment as a fact that deviates from expectation and experience, they go on to describe their impression that "people," broadly construed, are relating to one another as "off-flavor" (变味 *bianwei*). The author then switches tracks to address Li directly, asking him whether he thinks society is progressing or not. Implicitly suggesting that the author's embodied and relational assessment is that society is *not*, indeed, progressing, the question highlights how scalar inquiry is often enacted as participants address Li and one another to interrogate broad principles (e.g., progress, relationality, morality, freedom, memory, and nationhood, to name just a few) in relation to personal embodied experience.

## INTIMATE UNCERTAINTY

Drawing attention to scalar inquiry as an intimate form of engagement with sociomoral expectations of how society or the nation "should" be, how it is represented, and how it is remembered and experienced, the kinds of open-ended and scalar inquiries in the previous section depict a present space-time that is almost suspended in midair. Further underscoring scalar inquiry as a present experience of disorientation and rupture vis-à-vis the nation, Table 3 presents two longer messages in which scalar inquiry is enacted as an interrogation of distinctly personal and intimate experience. These messages show how authors, in responding to the crisis of Li's death, turned to Li to question their previously normative, relationally intimate modes of being-in-relation to others.

In 3(a), for example, the author begins with a spatialized description of their experience of "suffocation." Pointing to the kind of isolation detailed in the following section, this author states that they have "nowhere to speak." They situate their message within a specific national time-space in which the spread of COVID-19 has "eased" in China. Shifting rapidly from this broad perspective on the nation, they describe a specific personal encounter in which their child asked who Li Wenliang was. This is immediately followed by the conjunction "but," indicating a problem or contrast.

**TABLE 4** Interrogating Isolation

| | Message | Date |
|---|---|---|
| (a) | "The environment on Weibo is really bad. Why can there be only one kind of thinking? Why can there be only one voice? Everyone seems to be full of justice and righteousness, but the essence is disgusting. (Alright, I will stop complaining, Dr. Li, good night [heart])" | 3/17/2020 |
| (b) | "Dr. Li, although everyone is unhappy in their hearts, all they can do is suppress it. Words cannot be spoken. All one can do is force a smile. Why has our country become like this now? Is it like this in heaven?" | 3/22/2020 |
| (c) | "Dr. Li, Wuhan is unblocked. We seem to be victorious and dare not say anything more. In the midst of these songs of praise, I feel like I have no strength. Now everyone calls you a martyr, a hero, and you are honored. But what [actually] is this glorifying? Is it everyone's pride in China? Is the excitement that we are about to rise? Is it the hope of revival? The day before yesterday, all the Chinese cried for a whole day. What about after the crying? I do not know." | 4/9/2020 |
| (d) | "Dr. Li, do you think China today looks like a fairytale world? Everyone likes to hear other people telling fairytale stories?" | 4/26/2020 |
| (e) | "Old Li, when I couldn't sleep, I was thinking, our country is strong, why am I so tired when I was born in such a strong country? Others earn money to enjoy life, and I really just want to be able to live" | 8/18/2020 |

Indeed, they continue, something about the child's question rendered them speechless. Swiftly drawing together vastly public and deeply intimate scales of experience, they go on to situate the encounter in their felt experience of confusion with regard to the relational enactment of Chineseness. They embody an affective-relational stance of epistemic uncertainty ("I don't know") with regard to their ability to "be proud of being Chinese." This is followed by a parallelistic repetition that intensifies their description of the intimate ways in which Li's death and the events surrounding it had impacted the author's ability to enact normative relational roles. Drawing dominant cultural chronotopes of nationhood, education, and family into one coherent collective and personal moral project, 3(a) points to the ways in which the family, in China, constitutes the foundation for moral citizenship and is imagined and enacted through the intimate relational mode of simultaneously educating, training, guiding, and raising future generations to embody national pride (Lin 2017, 24; see also Kipnis 2011; Kuan 2015).

In expressing uncertainty about being able to teach their child that "the Chinese nation is based on benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom, faith, and virtue," the author establishes a critical distance between themselves and a version of the "Twelve Core Socialist Values" recently promoted by the CCP not just as moral ideals but, indeed, as legal mandates (Lin and Trevaskes 2019, 42). They end by problematizing the relationship between China and "these times that lack joy." Temporality is critical here, as the experience of misalignment between the real and ideal prevents them from enacting their right role vis-à-vis their child and the nation. Though not framed as an explicit question, scalar inquiry is palpable here as a form of ongoing interrogation that continually questions the positioning of the self in relation to culturally salient ideologies and relational practices.

Likewise calling attention to the way scalar inquiry—as a form of scalar intimacy—emerges in rapid shifts drawing together the personal and political, 3(b) opens with immediate intimacy, referring to Li as "Old fellow" (老乡 *laoxiang*) and inviting him to talk before bed. The author then engages in a narrative mode that, like the previous example, pivots around the conjunction "but," here serving to problematize their purchase of a ticket to return "home." Specifically, they express uncertainty about their ability or desire to return to their lucrative executive job and their ideal of "contributing to China." In doing so, the author simultaneously foregrounds their previous embrace of a globally dominant chronotope of national development, or "China's rise" (as another participant frames it below). Proceeding to locate their experience in temporal terms, they situate their questioning vis-à-vis their multiple recent encounters with life and death. Underscoring how "anxieties about the future are experienced subjectively but are not individual issues" (Karimzad and Catedral 2021, 65), they scale from China to the (impermanent) world, invoking the immediate embodied present with a "sigh." Followed by an ellipsis, the message here echoes the sentiment—often repeated on Li's page—that any country needs whistleblowers. Using a conjunction ("and") to refer to "what you said," the author then aligns themselves with Li's comment about how a healthy society "shouldn't have only the sound of one voice." Followed by an abrupt shift back to relating to Li through an expression of personal care or concern ("I hope you will be well there"), the conclusion of this message is notably formulated using a distal chronotopic formulation ("there") that maps Li into a faraway, distant place. In so doing, it poses a contrast between there and "here," underscoring the author's sense of how the here-and-now of their own life is plagued by an intimate but nevertheless scalar experience of suffering.

## INTERROGATING ISOLATION

Each of the examples in the previous section demonstrates the ways in which cumulative national crises, beginning with Li Wenliang's death, shape the felt experience of personal encounters in ways that motivate scalar inquiry. The messages in Table 4, however, underscore how scalar inquiry also emerges as an intimate questioning of relational experience at a broader scale.

The author of 4(a), for example, begins by foregrounding the sense of alienation the author feels in (other) online sites. Opening with a moral evaluation of the toxic environment that prevails on Weibo, the author adopts an evaluative stance that is based in the authority of personal experience. Underscoring scalar inquiry as a continual (re)positioning of the self within and in relation to broadly social spaces, they jump immediately into an interrogation of the sociomoral logics that prevail there. Expanding upon Li's statement about how a healthy society must have more than one kind of voice—here presented as a metonym for cognition—they go on to ask why only one kind of thinking can prevail in the Chinese online public. This alignment is expanded in a second question linked more directly to Li's description of "voices" in society. The author thus explicitly aligns with Li, implying that this kind of constraint, here framed in terms of both thought and speech, is unhealthy and toxic. Their moral evaluation continues as they identify a discrepancy between the stance of "justice and righteousness" that people convey and the affective, embodied feeling of disgust this evokes within them. Dismissing their formulation as a complaint, however, they conclude by adopting a more affiliative tone, parenthetically addressing Dr. Li to offer a kind of apology as well as a promise that they will hereby "stop complaining." This enacts a pragmatic emotional shift that relationally substantiates the author's alignment with Li and, indirectly, with others in the space. Their final comment, in which they wish Li a good night—a sentiment punctuated with a heart emoji—further contributes to the co-creation of Li's wall as an intimate space in which the moral and relational norms contrast to other public spaces in China (Pritzker and Hu 2022).

Example 4(b), posted five days later, offers further insight into how the kind of alienation visible in the previous post extends across both public and private spaces. Opening with a direct address to "Dr. Li," the author begins with a declarative statement that highlights the tension between emotion and expression in China. Indeed, the author launches directly into a description of a profound sense of isolation, scaled broadly as something that affects "everyone" in the nation. Pointing to state-supported narratives of happiness and "positive energy" (正能量 *zheng nengliang*) (Hird 2018; Wielander 2018; Yang 2018 ), the author presumes a common experience in which both feelings and words must be suppressed (憋着*biezhe*) by a "forced smile." This message thus formulates the experience of unsayability as far more than an issue of censorship. Unfreedom, this message highlights, emerges as an intimate, affective, and relational experience of repression. Situating the present as a disjuncture from the past in an open-ended question deictically directed to other Chinese citizens and the national Chinese present, they then ask why "our country" has become "like this now." They go on to cast a spatial mapping that scales the lived world vis-à-vis "heaven" as the space currently occupied by Li (see Pritzker and Hu 2022). This query—like the previous example—suggests how scalar inquiry is often affectively articulated as a sense of curiosity as well as a longing for a different way of being-in-relation. The timing of the post, on March 22, 2020, just three days after Li's reputation had been restored by the CCP (see Table 1), also spotlights the ways in which the state response to public calls for justice was felt by many as a second and even more egregious form of betrayal, as detailed above.

On April 8, the opening of Wuhan was celebrated as a triumph over COVID-19 (see Table 1). This celebration comes under scrutiny, however, in examples 4(c) and 4(d). Opening with a direct address to Dr. Li, the author of 4(c) situates their message in the immediate present and begins with an update on the recent opening of Wuhan. They continue by offering a description of their intimate sense of their embodied, affective, and moral experience within what is depicted as a disorienting sociopolitical environment. Drawing themselves into a collective "we," they center the ways in which their apparent victory co-occurs with a feeling of fear and inability, as well as unwillingness, to speak. They proceed to situate themselves in the midst of a sociopolitical soundscape, here characterized by "songs of praise" (see Kunreuther 2018). Drawing attention to their own embodied response to such a soundscape, they describe their response as a feeling of a profound loss of strength. Offering a rich image of a person who is physically and emotionally drained by the enactment of national pride in their surroundings, they move on to interrogate the discrepancy between the ways in which people around them are referring positively to Li. A series of questions follows, each of which asks what such glorification indexes. Posing a rapid-fire list of possibilities—including pride, excitement about China's anticipated "rise," and/or the "hope of revival"—the author enacts a stance of distance that simultaneously scrutinizes and questions multiple salient cultural chronotopes. The enactment of stance is elaborated in a temporal formulation that draws this disorienting celebratory present into direct contrast with the collective grief of the recent past. This framing affords the positing of an open-ended question and statement expressing the author's explicit uncertainty and implied fear about what, given all of the above, will happen in the future.

Example 4(d) likewise depicts the felt sense of disjuncture the author is experiencing between the performance of nationhood and the reality underlying such displays. Though slightly more indirect than the previous example, this message nevertheless demonstrates how scalar inquiry often emerges in relation to a felt sense of isolation. Situating their question in a national space and enduring present, specifically, they launch directly into asking Li if China today appears as a "fairytale world." Casting the nation vis-à-vis a genre of imaginative fiction in which optimism often hinges upon the depiction of magical or idealized worlds, they interrogate how such storytelling is not only normalized but even possibly enjoyed by everyone in the nation. This scalar inquiry thus points, subtly but directly, to the kinds of "fakery" that often prevails in contemporary China (Wielander 2018), grounding the interrogation of such deception in the felt experience of isolation and confusion.

Finally, 4(e) demonstrates the simultaneously intimate and scalar ways that Li's death challenged people to interrogate their normative relationship to nationhood and Chineseness. This post opens in a confessional mode in which the author describes the embodied experience of being unable to sleep. Situating themselves as part of a collective, a country that is apparently strong, they draw attention to the disjuncture between the strength of the nation and the fatigue they admit that they continuously feel. Comparing their experience to the moral force that seems motivating to others, they distinguish themselves from others and note their desire simply "to live." Also implying the author's feeling of disjuncture and alienation from others, this final example—like the others here—underscores how cumulative crises moved people to come to Li's wall to "speak truth"

**TABLE 5** Interrogating the Future

| | Message | Date |
|---|---|---|
| (a) | "Dr. Li, you have all died in vain. . . . I don't know why it is like this. What is going on with this society? What is going on with these people? I love my ancestral land, but this kind of country makes my heart feel bitter and distressed. When will [we] be able to speak freely?" | 4/3/2020 |
| (b) | "Dr. Li, your Weibo is a wailing wall, and people with justice and conscience come here to mourn and cry; your Weibo is also a wall of resonant echoes. Thousands of people who in reality cannot find a friend to confide in come here to find sympathetic resonance. Your Weibo is a bonfire, and countless people traveling in the dark come here to find light and warmth. I have come to pose a question: When will the long night usher in the light?" | 4/16/2020 |
| (c) | "Old Li, is there any hope for China?" | 5/31/2020 |
| (d) | "It's been a long time since I've come! More than 6 million cases of COVID-19 have been diagnosed globally and more than 360,000 deaths! How is the world seeing China now? This is a question that every person needs to think about! Do we need to rethink our explanation to the world? To what extent have you also considered it?!" | |
| (e) | "Brother Liang, when I wake up every day and read the news, I feel that the whole world isn't playing with us anymore. This feels so bad, how can I fix it in the future?" | 7/23/2020 |

(as in the second epigraph of this article) as well as to question *together*. In so doing, it underscores the ways in which Li's wall is co-created as a unique relational and ethical space within which people can anonymously issue broadly scaled interrogations that are grounded in their personal lived experience of unfreedom, isolation, and inability to speak.

## INTERROGATING THE FUTURE

As demonstrated in numerous examples thus far, scalar inquiry on Li Wenliang's Weibo thread often emerges as a nuanced interrogation of the simultaneously personal and cultural/political present in China, frequently in relation to the lived past. In this final section, however, I draw attention to examples in which authors enact scalar inquiry by posing questions that orient toward the unknown *future* with curiosity as well as variable formulations of agency (see Table 5).

Example 5(a), for instance, begins with a personally directed comment that groups Li with others who have died "in vain." The author immediately enacts an affective and moral stance, implying a lost opportunity for a broader collective shift. They proceed to express a sense of epistemic uncertainty about the reason(s) why Chinese society ("it") is "like this." A series of two open-ended questions, in which they reiterate their stance of confusion about "society" and "the people," follows. They then describe the affective-relational experience of "love" for their ancestral land. However, the conjunction "but" immediately signals that this love is troubled. Indeed, they continue, "this kind of country" causes them to feel bitterness and distress at the core of their being. Ending with another open-ended question that asks when freedom of speech will become possible in China, the author orients to desire in its invocation of an (im)possible future in which freedom of speech exists as an embodied, relational possibility.

Example 5(b) centers explicitly on the community on Li's wall as a beacon of hope for the desired future. The author opens by addressing Dr. Li and casting his page as a unique relational space where like-minded people "with justice and conscience" can gather to collaboratively feel and express their grief. Pointing to the kind of isolation often felt by those who pose questions in China (Pritzker 2021 ), they expand their formulation of the space in the following description of the page as "a wall of resonant echoes" (回音壁 *huiyin bi*) where thousands of bereft individuals who have no one else to speak honestly with come to find "sympathetic resonance" (共鸣 *gongming*). They proceed to call Li's wall a "bonfire," poetically casting the online community as a space of warmth and light that offers hope to those "traveling in the dark." Casting a rich spatiotemporal and experiential contrast between Li's wall and the rest of Chinese society, the message closes with an open question. Asking when "the long night might usher in light," they interrogatively gesture toward a future in which such collaborative interrogation might be realized beyond these intermittent and marginal encounters.

In the previous two examples, a kind of hope—or, rather, a *desire* for hope—seems to glimpse out from a present in which authors are consumed by grief and disappointment. Example 5(c) explicitly centers this hope in a short message framed as an intimately addressed turn toward "Old Li" (老李 Lao Li). In this example, the author simply poses the question of whether there is any hope for China. Scalar inquiry, in such questions, emerges as a deeply felt kind of hope-beyond-hopelessness that orients specifically to Li Wenliang as well as the intermittent community on his wall.

In contrast, example 5(d), posted in early June, discursively enacts a more specific desire for collective agency. Like several posts early after Li's death in which authors enacted scalar inquiry by positioning themselves and others in the space as somehow having a role to play in shifting the disorienting sociopolitical landscape prevailing in China, this example presents participants' continual questioning as a potential collectively enacted solution. Beginning by situating themselves in an ongoing temporal relationship to Li's wall, they establish their familiarity and history, and they move on to enact a rapid shift in scale. Specifically, they invoke a global present within which there has been a staggering number of cases and

deaths from COVID-19. Shifting to interrogate how "the world" is seeing or evaluating China, they place other participants—formulated as "we"—in a national moral-relational world in which individual Chinese citizens are agentively positioned to "rethink our explanation to the world." Ending by positing another question, the author approaches others and asks the extent to which they have also considered this issue. While arguably not an example of a form of direct action, this post nevertheless demonstrates how scalar inquiry enacted in large (albeit anonymous) groups sometimes emerges as an urgent collective appeal to engage in questioning dominant cultural narratives so as to contribute to an alternative possible future.

Finally, the author of 5(e) begins with an experiential perspective on their daily, ongoing encounter with the national news. Addressing Li intimately as "Brother Liang" (亮哥 *Liang ge*), they formulate a temporal sequence of ongoing experience in which they confront dismay every day upon waking and encountering the news. Describing a sense of temporal disjuncture, they point (at least indirectly) to the kinds of playfulness—engagement with "Baby Forklift," for example—that emerged early in what was then an epidemic (Wong et al. 2021). They feel, specifically, as if "the whole world" has shifted from playfully engaging with "us," describing this feeling as "bad." Underscoring the complex relationship between political subjectivity and desire for agency, if not agency itself, the message closes by framing the situation in China as a personal problem that the author has the desire to "fix." Individual agency is thus simultaneously imagined and, at least discursively, enacted.

In centering agency in these examples, I am not suggesting that any of the authors cited here are motivated to incite any kind of broadscale collective political action, at least not on their own. The examples demonstrate, however, that scalar inquiry might be understood as a form of embodied political subjectivity that emerges at the intersections of desire, temporality, belonging, and morality (Giordano 2018; Ku 2019; Martinsson and Reimers 2020; Vidali 2014). As simultaneously personal and collective process of collaboratively questioning normative structures—or "defrosting," in Arendtian terms (Arendt 1971; see also Mattingly 2019)—this analysis of scalar inquiry demonstrates how participants on Li's wall actively draw upon their personal affective and relational experiences in relation to Li's death and an accumulation of events that followed to interrogate dominant discourses in China.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I have examined messages posted on "China's Wailing Wall" over the year following Li Wenliang's death. Chronotopic contrasts (e.g., then/now, surface/depth, performance/reality) emerged as participants enacted scalar intimacy in utterances that swiftly drew together personal feelings and broader patterns in public life (Delfino 2021; Pritzker and Perrino 2020; Wong et al. 2021). In questions posed by participants interrogating the personal and social present at various scales—often vis-à-vis comparison with lived pasts and anticipated futures—participants further enacted a form of *scalar inquiry*, in which they interrogated their intimate sense of themselves as embodied, relational agents located within and along a shared and emergent spatiotemporal and moral national trajectory. An intermittent yet continuous kind of "moral laboratory" (Mattingly 2014) began to take shape, within which participants problematized the boundaries between what is personal and what is public—as well as what is sayable and what is not—in China. Highlighting how sayability extends far beyond the mere posting of contentious political critique, Li's wall becomes visible not only as an "apolitical" emotional space or a space of resistance through collective memory but also as a space within which new, deeply personal modes of being-in-relation are examined, interrogated, and adjusted in relation to interrogations of the political.

Given that this article has focused on a small subset of comments within an archive of largely censored posts, however, it is reasonable to question the ultimate efficacy of such a community. It is unlikely, for example, that those asking questions on Li's wall—at least individually—had or have any explicit designs to incite collective action or political resistance more broadly. Authors' orientation to Li's death and following events as causes of intimate ruptures in their experience of the nation, however, shows how scalar inquiry can be enacted by those whose positioning in society, under "normal" circumstances, at least usually affords an orientation that does *not* involve active questioning. Several scholars have thus centered the potential of these kinds of interrogations as an emergent form of dreaming that precedes and motivates more explicit forms of social action (see, e.g., Loizidou 2016). Scalar inquiry on Li's Weibo wall thus demonstrates how not just asking questions but *questioning together* in a uniquely enduring (if intermittent) conversation contributes to the formation of what Hillenbrand (2020, 222) describes as the kind of "minor public" that temporarily takes shape when people collaboratively "experiment, for a while at least, with being honest." Participants' engagement in questioning the sociomoral logics that prevail in present Chinese society further ties these participants to a long and enduring conversation enacted by an actively engaged Chinese public that continually questions the state. Such questions, often appearing in single messages that quickly disappear before they are circulated broadly (see, e.g., Yu 2022), [9] likewise *continue*—as of this writing, at least—to emerge on Li's wall as citizens interrogate everything from restrictions on June 4 commemorations in Hong Kong to gender-based violence in mainland China (see, e.g., Carter 2022). As part of emergent and continuous conversations across space and time, scalar inquiry on Li's wall from 2020 through the present, finally, might therefore also be seen as offering insight into the kinds of experiences, encounters, and (re)considerations that led not just to the widespread protests throughout China in November 2022 (Feng 2022; Hall, Horwitz, and Pollard 2022) but also to various smaller acts of resistance and protest throughout the year (Timson and Bagshaw 2022).

Demonstrating the sense of intense isolation often experienced by those who question in China (see also Byler 2021; Pritzker 2021), this article offers perspective on how it is not just political dissidents and activists but Chinese citizens from all walks of life who agentively engage with the kind of public propaganda that is often apprehended as totalizing (Latham 2007). Scalar inquiry also contributes more broadly to anthropological

analyses by foregrounding how political subjectivity emerges as a simultaneously embodied and discursive process through which a continually unfolding "horizon of constrained, but open-ended, possibilities" takes shape (Goodwin 2018, 445–46; see also Vidali 2014). In linguistic anthropology, finally, this analysis contributes to the further development of scalar intimacy as a theoretical and methodological intervention, drawing together embodied experience and interaction (Pritzker and Perrino 2020). Scalar inquiry specifically addresses the ways in which scalar *intimacy*, though always agentive, might be enacted as a fugitive investigation once people begin to question their place within normative structures and spatiotemporal structures of feeling that within so-called normal times are taken for granted.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] https://www.weibo.com/u/1139098205?is_all = 1#1593125321205.

[2] Though arguably problematic in terms of scope, the designation of Li's Weibo page as "China's Wailing Wall" is explicitly conceptualized in relation to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Many thus compare the scale of their grief, as well as their digital "pilgrimage" to Li's page, to that of Jews lamenting the destruction of the Temple Mount. Relatedly, Li's wall is also conceived as a *spiritual* space where participants orient to Dr. Li as a saint and even a god (Pritzker and Hu 2022)

[3] Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LiWengliang.jpg.

[4] "健康的社会不应有一种声音"; also translated as "There should be more than one voice in a healthy society" (Qin et al. 2020).

[5] Friction involves "increasing the costs, either in time or money, of access or spread of information" (Roberts 2018, 6), preventing even those urban elite who have access to virtual private networks (VPNs) to spend effort on jumping what is often referred to as "The Great Firewall" in China (149). Flooding, on the other hand, involves overwhelming online actors with confusing, nationalistic, or irrelevant content "designed to distract from political arguments" (210).

[6] Source: https://www.whatsonweibo.com/li-wenliang-remembered-one-year-later-his-life-death-and-legacy-on-chinese-social-media/ (Courtesy *What's on Weibo*).

[7] https://chinadigitaltimes.net/about/.

[8] Due to the complex and continuous effects of friction and flooding on the Chinese internet, it is difficult to track precisely which messages in the current archive were, in fact, removed by state censors. As demonstrated by Wade (2021), however, the CDT archive offers a corrective vantage point on journalistic as well as academic investigations that engage only with comments that have remained public (Zhou and Zhong 2021).

[9] A song entitled "Don't Drink the Celebratory Toast," for example, circulated on WeChat in mid-summer 2022 for only a single hour before being deleted by censors. The lyrics invoke the celebratory atmosphere and "songs of praise" referenced by the author in example 4(c), direct listeners to refuse or at least question state-promoted narratives of "triumph" and "harmony," in this case in relation to the lifting of Shanghai's severe lockdown (Yu 2022).

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