Digital activism and collective mourning by Chinese netizens during COVID-19

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Abstract
This study examines the discursive practice of mourning and commenting by netizens on the final social media post made by Dr Li Wenliang, regarding it as a form of political participation and competitive discursive politics enacted in cyberspace. Discourse theory is applied to conduct discourse analysis on 4000 comments. We identified two strategies that netizens used to establish an alternative space for discourse. The first involved hidden protests expressed through multi-semantic mourning, avoiding suppression by indirectly challenging official authorities. Second, through engagement with microblogs, netizens applied personalized narratives to form a collective memory and a counter-memory space that departed from the official normative narrative. Discursive activities enacted by netizens stimulated the political agenda of resilient adjustment on the part of the authorities, leading the government to accept and incorporate public demands into policies through strategic rectification. These findings help to better understand the significant power of disorganized connective action that is reliant on affective citizens and the further development of regime resilience on the part of the Chinese political system in response to digital activities.

Keywords
digital activism, Li Wenliang, counter-hegemony, hidden transcript, collective narration, discursive politics

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On 30 December 2019, Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, Hubei Province, sent a screenshot of a diagnostic report with the caption ‘Suspected SARS Virus’ to colleagues via a Chinese social media platform, WeChat, warning them of a possible outbreak of a new virus, now known as SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19). He was subsequently questioned and accused by police at the Public Security Bureau in Wuhan of spreading rumours and was required to sign a letter of reprimand admitting that his action was ‘wrong’ and promising not to do it again or face legal punishment. However, facts later proved that the information he released was not false. Unfortunately, by this time, Dr Li had contracted SARS-CoV-2 and later died on 7 February 2020. In his final post on SinaWeibo on 1 February 2020 (see Figure 1), he announced that he had contracted COVID-19. In the months following his death, millions of netizens took to social media in anger over his death, leaving comments and mourning on his final post, which was unprecedented.

Several Chinese media regarded Dr Li as a COVID-19 ‘whistle-blower’ who actively engaged in anti-epidemic work until his death, with many believing that he was treated unfairly. His treatment contributed to widespread public gratitude, sympathy, and resentment but, due to the government’s social control during the epidemic, citizens were unable to carry out street petitions in support of Dr Li. This led them to express their feelings and demands through microblogs. The discursive practice demonstrated in the comments section of his final post can be regarded as a form of public participation, and as antagonistic discursive politics enacted in cyberspace. As one of the most popular social media platforms in China, SinaWeibo is regarded as a ‘government-regulated commercial space’ and is subject to multiple dimensions of self-censorship. In 2019, the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

Figure 1. The last post by Dr Li Wenliang on SinaWeibo.
Source: Li Wenliang’s SinaWeibo page, https://weibo.com/u/1139098205?is_all=1, accessed 21 September 2021.
issued guidelines that required online information content service providers to establish methods to check the legitimacy of information released and commented upon. Similarly, information content producers were advised not to produce, copy, or release information that opposed the leadership of the CCP or China’s socialist system. Some studies have argued that censored speech does not fully reflect the will of the authority and believe that it is the result of multi-group games and negotiations, which demonstrates the notion of Internet censorship as ‘a way of producing speech’.3

This study examines the discursive practice found on the final post of Dr Li to learn how political participation is possible within Chinese cyberspace, and to illustrate discursive strategy and its implications in the Chinese context. As a digital collective action, there is no clear mobilization framework, and the relationship between netizens and officials is not solely a binary opposition of resistance–control. Although the authorities could have taken powerful action to deal with the situation, in reality they did not. While many believe that the government was cautious about the surge in public opinion, it now has, after years of dealing with the Internet, more flexible strategies to deal with issues rather than repression. Thus, in what sense does mourning become a connective action? Specifically, what types of individual narrative strategies did netizens employ to shape the personal microblog of Dr Li into an alternative discursive space? What role does Dr Li’s microblog play in supporting and nurturing turbulent and complex public emotions? And what is the logic behind the official response and actions? Our research finds that netizens carried out hidden protests through posting mourning notices with rich connotations and established a counter-memory space to pressurize officialdom; officials responded tactically to public opinion, rewarding Dr Li and reframing the hero’s identity. Thus, the authorities calmed public sentiment, while defusing their own crisis of legitimacy.

Digital activism and discursive politics

Extant studies into social media and digital activism have focused on the role of social media during social movements, especially the interaction between online and offline actions. According to these studies, social media has contributed to the development of social movements, such as expanding the opportunity structure and mobilization structure for collective action,4 supporting and improving organizational effectiveness, strengthening the internal and external relations of movements, and building cross-regional alliances.5 Other studies remind us not to ignore the view that social media has given birth to the practice of ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ in which the illusion of radicalism is created to support a political cause.6

The aforementioned research regards social media as a tool or variable within the framework of traditional contentious politics.7 The online/offline and virtual/reality dichotomization8 still focuses on practical actions, implying that offline actions are better than online actions and are more significant in promoting social change, while probably underestimating the political potential of discourse in the digital community. Some studies believe that social media, unlike mass media, ‘has created new contexts for activism’9 which have fundamentally changed the logic and mechanism of collective action. Some researchers argue that networked social movements are guided by connective logic, at the core of which is ‘the
recognition of digital media as organizing agents'. The combination of new media and a personal action framework allows individuals to engage with politics as ‘an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances’ which introduces another perspective to digital activism which focuses on the potential of discourse. In this type of discursive politics, actors use social networks creatively to achieve political effects. One of the most prominent strategies is hashtag activism. Hashtags provide an effective mobilization framework which can create narrative focus, enlarge certain narrative preferences, integrate fragmented and personalized narratives into collective political ideas, and spur cross-departmental mobilization. Meanwhile, they can construct an open dialogue space, effectively oppose the normative narration of a dominant ideology, and serve as a collective memory resource that similar actions can refer to in future.

Many studies further support the important role of affect in activism. Citizens listen to and learn from each other’s personal preferences and differences, increasing ‘the possibility for shared action across difference’, even after specific content links are closed, affective flows and links still exist and resonate with netizens, forming circular ‘feelings of community’, which demonstrates that affect is a morally appropriate element of democratic communication. Zizi Papacharissi used the concept of the ‘affective public’ to explain how citizens’ affective expressions function as political statements through the discourse intermediary of social media. Affective stories are not only used to attract attention or foster compassion, but also to serve as a force to stimulate participation in dialogue and activism.

**Discursive politics as counter-hegemony**

Nancy Fraser acknowledged that discursive politics is ‘an essential strategy of political resistance’. For Chantal Mouffe, politics is a fierce struggle for discourse hegemony among actors. In this struggle, two or more sides seek to fix meaning in a specific field when discourse is formed. Discursive struggle is the core of agonistic democracy. Its method and purpose are to establish an alternative discursive space that can compete with the dominant discourse. This opposes the essentialization of rationality in the public sphere and inspires a new interpretation of online discursive politics.

Online media is a ‘heavily contested battlefield for meaning’. A diverse variety of discourse struggles, resistance, statements, solidarities, and alternative expressions have formed a unique discourse politics whose complexity transcends the simplified binaries of democracy–non-democracy and resistance–control. The representative view is that the Internet provides public discussion spaces which are prerequisites for civil participation and for democratizing agenda building. However, some caution that the Internet as a tool will not bring democracy, although it can be used as a catalyst for political evolution in the long run. Due to China’s unique political system and social culture, both the evolution of Internet management and netizens’ choice of action are rooted in a historical context. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the role of alternative discourses in the process of resisting hegemony and shaping civic power by grasping the ‘distinctive features in a historical process marked by both constraints and contingency’. As offline movements have been strictly controlled by policies, symbols and discursive contestation have become an important part of Internet culture in China. Chinese netizens have become
acquainted to or adept at engaging in public expression in a manner that does not directly oppose the regime, but which is reflected in political satire with a ‘protective colour’ and in obscure, complicated criticism of political issues. Readers also know how to ‘fill in the gap’ and understand what is only implied.25 Such political criticism has developed into parody, irony, and satire.26 Representative symbols, such as ‘grass-mud horse’, have stimulated the creativity of citizens and spawned a series of subsequent words, pushing the symbolic power of social criticism to a higher level.27 These alternative political discourses on the Internet constitute an important part of civic culture.28 In essence, online media has become a platform for the war of position against authority.29

**Data collection**

This study conducted qualitative analysis on 4000 comments made by netizens on the final microblog post of Dr Li on SinaWeibo. First, we chose 6 February–8 April 2020 as the observation period. The reason was that 6 February 2020 was the last day a rescue attempt was made to save Dr Li’s life, while 8 April 2020 was the day that Wuhan lifted its 76-day citywide lockdown. Second, while continuously observing the evolution of public sentiment and discourse evidenced by netizens’ comments on Dr Li’s microblog, it was found that the follow-up events and epidemic-related issues raised by the passing of Dr Li created several peaks in public opinion and comments. As a result, 10 critical moments were identified as peaks in public opinion that were subsequently used as time windows for text sampling. These time windows are listed in Table 1.

We applied three principles in the selection of comments: information clarity, non-repetition, and information saturation. The outcome was that 400 comments were selected from each time window as samples for discourse analysis, and a total of 4000 samples were obtained. We then reviewed existing qualitative coding methods,30 and chose a manual inductive coding method to analyse the samples. From one-third of the total sample, six main topics were identified as the most representative types of comments. These topics were then applied to a more detailed content classification. Each topic was subdivided into several sub-items, resulting in a total of 33 items, to evaluate more comprehensively and accurately the content of netizens’ comments (see Table 2 for further details). On this basis, the concept of ‘hidden transcript’ and discourse theory were employed to analyse the structure and strategies of the meaning system of discourse disputes. The concept of an ‘affective public’ is also introduced to examine how social media promotes the rise of affective politics.

**Hidden protest: Discourse struggle in mourning**

The most striking and prominent theme in netizens’ comments on the final post of Li Wenliang was undoubtedly mourning. However, this mourning was not monotonous. A series of expressions of dissatisfaction, criticism, and condemnation were woven into mourning, which can be considered to be a hidden transcript. Since ‘hidden transcript’ is a self-disclosure which is excluded from the power discourse, protests can be expressed in obscure and flexible ways. Where our study is concerned, netizens were dissatisfied with what had happened to Dr Li before his death and called for the ‘hero’ to be vindicated.

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Table 1. Sampling time windows.

| Serial number | Time node     | Corresponding event/topic                                                                 |
|---------------|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1             | 6–7 February  | Last attempt to save Dr Li and his subsequent death.                                      |
| 2             | 7 February    | The National Supervisory Commission sets up a central investigation team to investigate issues involving Li Wenliang. |
| 3             | 9 February    | At a press conference in Hubei Province, an expert says that COVID-19 is caused by a SARS coronavirus. |
| 4             | 11 February   | Zhong Nanshan, head of the high-level expert group of the National Health Commission, is interviewed by Reuters and praises Li Wenliang as a hero. |
| 5             | 3 March       | Dr Mei Zhongming, Li Wenliang’s superior at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, dies.          |
| 6             | 5 March       | Li Wenliang is named an advanced individual in epidemic prevention and control by the National Health Commission. |
| 7             | 10–12 March   | ‘A person who distributes whistles’, an interview report about Li Wenliang’s colleague Dr Ai Fen, who first took a photo of a suspected SARS diagnostic report and sent it to colleagues, is deleted from social media platforms, and netizens convert the report into another version using different characters for dissemination. |
| 8             | 19 March      | The central investigation team announces its investigation results.                       |
| 9             | 2–4 April     | Li Wenliang is identified by the government of Hubei Province as a martyr. The state holds public ceremonies during Qingming Festival. |
| 10            | 8 April       | Wuhan lifts measures prohibiting travel out of Wuhan.                                     |

Source: Compiled by authors.

The act of mourning then became a way to uphold justice. Some netizens felt that, with regard to Dr Li’s experience, the right to know and speak freely had been violated. As they mourned, they strongly expressed their willingness to protect citizens’ legitimate rights; therefore, mourning was also used to advocate rights for citizens. Netizens used the death of Dr Li to question who was responsible for the spread of the epidemic and to discuss the harm it caused internationally, and thus mourning became a way to define social trauma. These protests were expressed through mourning and became a counter-hegemonic discourse.

**Mourning as a means of obtaining justice**

Some netizens believed that Li Wenliang had been treated unfairly. Before government recognition of SARS-CoV-2, he had been criticized by the top management of the hospital where he worked, reprimanded by the local police, and called a ‘rumour monger’ by official media outlets. However, the outbreak of the epidemic ultimately confirmed how legitimate and necessary his warning was. Therefore, what he did was regarded as an honest, brave, and heroic act of resisting power, and the hero’s unjust death was a
signal that justice was not done. As James Scott pointed out, ‘the pressure generated by a perceived but unrequited injustice finds expression . . . in the hidden transcript’, \(^{32}\) and commenters compared his righteous deeds and values to monuments, stars, beacons, lighthouses, coordinates of conscience, and so on. For example:

You are a star in the dark night, you are a retrograde person of the mob, you are a navigation mark in the surging sea, you are an invisible wailing wall, and you are a monument that will never be erased.\(^{33}\)
The reprimand that police asked him to sign was elevated to the status of a medal in recognition of his heroism: ‘It’s almost dawn, I’m leaving, with the reprimand letter, which is the only medal in my life.’ Some netizens also thought that the reprimand should be treasured to ‘let future generations see the absurdity of this era’. In particular, Zhong Nanshan, a renowned expert in the eyes of Chinese citizens, tearfully praised Dr Li as a hero in an interview with Reuters, which was cited by netizens as a sign of the recognition of Li’s folk hero status: ‘Grandpa Zhong Nanshan said you were a hero. I’m afraid you can’t hear it. I’ve come here to tell you [this].’

Dr Li ‘became something of a focus of popular solidarity and resistance’ in that he was highly regarded as a righteous man. Further, the official accusation against him was seen as unreasonable and an embarrassment to the Chinese government. Thousands of netizens called for an apology for the unfair allegations, an investigation into whether he was treated unfairly, and a claim to restore his reputation. In this way, netizens took ‘the form of a cult rather than direct political resistance’ to avoid being suppressed by authorities and, thereby, they gained symbolic capital for the discursive struggle. This ongoing appeal was a means to safeguard the reputation and dignity of Dr Li and was a form of moral assistance, which netizens called ‘guarding’: ‘Before his death, he devoted all his efforts to guarding us and did not even get a formal apology. Now it’s our turn to guard him, and everyone is trying to justify him.’

Dignity is ‘a very private and a very public attribute’ and, therefore, restoring the good name of the hero was an important symbol for netizens to uphold justice. It represented a counter-hegemonic stance and created an alternative discourse via praise of the hero instead of resorting to protest.

**Mourning as a means of advocating citizens’ rights**

In their comments, netizens implied their advocacy of the right to know and the right to express themselves. This hidden transcript strategy was primarily transmitted through the metaphor of the whistle-blower. *Caixin* (财新), a well-known media group, was the first to label Dr Li a whistle-blower, highlighting the value of his early warning. This metaphor was quickly adopted by netizens to extend the meaning of rights protection. First, whistle-blower represented the power of truth and the courage to tell the truth under pressure: ‘You put the truth on the scales and let the world know its weight!’ The term ‘telling the truth’ became a spiritual heritage guarded by members of society: ‘The whistle-blower has left, but his whistle is still there. We must take good care of his whistle.’

The incident also contributed to the ‘awakening’ of civic spirit: ‘People say that you are the best ophthalmologist in the world because you have cured the eyes of countless Chinese people at once.’

Further, netizens extended whistle-blowing to include the right to free speech which became a moral force to encourage citizens to express themselves more bravely: ‘I remind myself every day to be alert, to be good, to tell the truth, and to be responsible to the people!’ Even if they did not dare speak out, they believed that they should be kind: ‘Brother Liang . . . maybe I can’t speak out like you, but I will be a kind person.’

Second, netizens repeatedly quoted Dr Li with regard to the right to freedom of speech. When a journalist asked Li Wenliang how he viewed being reprimanded, he answered that ‘a healthy society should not have only one voice’. Through persistently quoting his words, netizens sought to take advantage of the lessons of this incident to gain more space
for public expression in future. Examples include: ‘A healthy society should not have only one voice. I hope this voice can pierce the darkness!’ and ‘I hope your sacrifice can help to institute a clean Internet platform, so that we are not reprimanded, not deleted, and not sealed.’

Although these comments touch on the sensitive topic of Western-style freedom of speech, something which worries Chinese officials, netizens adopted a euphemization strategy, talking about the matter as it is or using the vague word ‘world’ to refer to Chinese society, thereby avoiding direct and fierce criticism of the system. To quote one such example: ‘The world should not have only one voice. I hope you will live in a more open and free China in your next life. Let us do what we haven’t yet done.’

Under such circumstances, netizens were highly sensitive and resistant to the censorship of comments on microblog platforms, although they maintained a restrained or vague style of criticism: ‘Come and see. They continue to delete posts. I don’t understand why such a powerful country is afraid of being told the truth.’ Netizens also implicitly criticized authorities for not drawing lessons from the information blockade: ‘Dr Li, why should they even delete the message from Weibo about people lining up to get urns in Wuhan? Do you think we have learned nothing from this epidemic?’

In this context, while the form of expression is inherently vague, it clearly conveys what the discontent is. Normally, comments critical of censorship are likely to be removed but, in this particular case concerning Dr Li, many such comments were left alone (though comments of this type made up only a tiny fraction of all comments). Although commenters are not anonymous, they ‘nevertheless achieve a kind of anonymity’ which ‘makes it next to impossible to single out individuals for retaliation’.

Mourning as a way to define social trauma

The mourning observed in relation to Dr Li’s final post reflects how netizens defined the social trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Citizens could not help but ask questions such as: where did this crisis come from?; to what extent is the early suppression of information to blame for the outbreak?; who is responsible for this?; and what does this crisis mean for individuals and society? Although answers to these questions were personalized and fragmented, through the linking mechanism of microblogs, a collective definition of this social trauma has, to a certain extent, been formed, creating space for an alternative discourse that departs from any official definition. First, netizens stressed that those who had concealed the epidemic situation should take responsibility, highlighting the role of human culpability. This attribution was reflected not only in the fate of Dr Li but also in that of other medical staff: ‘Brother Liang, your departure is... purely a man-made disaster.’ ‘Dr Wenliang... three more doctors died in the Central Hospital of Wuhan where you worked... someone should give their lives for your and your colleagues’ sacrifice!’ Netizens were saddened by the costs to individuals and society, and pointed out that the pain of the epidemic would last for a long time:

People are not just simply remembering Dr Li, but beyond that people are angry about why they [officials] did not pay attention at the beginning, why they chose to conceal the report in the first
place, why they reprimanded Dr. Li for warning people? . . . We cannot forget Dr Li just as we cannot forget the tragedy that should have been avoided.55

‘Dr Li, the disaster is coming to an end . . . but the memory of trauma will never end.’56 Netizens were most disappointed and worried about forgetting the pain after the wound had healed: ‘How are you, Dr Li? The celebration has already begun and they have not changed anything after this pandemic.’57 These expressions reflect netizens’ tendencies to define the nature of the tragedy within the framework of human responsibility, highlighting the serious consequences of information control and its long-term impact on social life as well as the necessity for accountability and protest. Papacharissi pointed out that ‘the emotion infiltrating the texture of political expression’ is ‘indignation with a set of circumstances’ that had persisted for too long.58 In this case, public anger led not only to the pursuit of responsibility for the current crisis, but also to the concentrated outbreak of dissatisfaction with long-standing systemic defects. Therefore, feelings of grief and indignation can be interpreted as being ‘ideologically shapeless’.59 Netizens reflected on the problems associated with social management and the system, as revealed by the epidemic, and hoped for improvement in future – otherwise the harm would continue indiscriminately for everyone. Many netizens stated that ‘mourning Dr Li is mourning oneself’: ‘Why are we crying . . . we still see the shadows of countless people in you.’60 ‘Everyone who comes here knows that each of us may be the next you, if we don’t do something.’61

Judith Butler argued that mourning is relational, stating that ‘it shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us’, while sadness ‘furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order’.62 Through mourning, netizens were able to reflect on their situation and relate to the worries of others. The feeling of inseparability between their own fate and the fate of others established a symbolic but firm relationship of mutual support: ‘we’ joined in a relationship; thus, sadness itself becomes a political resource.63

**Witness for the future: Transforming private narration into collective memory**

Li Wenliang’s final post mobilized netizens to shape a collective memory for the future. Thousands of netizens bore witness to and preserved their own experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and together they established an alternative memory space parallel to the official dominant narrative. Through strong emotional connections, dispersed citizens became a united community, reflecting the empowering role of social media. It was observed that ‘the act of making private ideas public has the potential for political action’; through acts of ‘self-reference’, the private can be transformed into the public and the personal into the civic.64

‘Don’t forget!’

One of the most powerful forces driving netizens to leave messages and comments was the repeated reminder ‘don’t forget’. Although the epidemic then had not yet subsided, netizens realized that what they were experiencing would become part of history. The definition of this experience would increasingly be dominated by an official version. However, the various appeals to restore the good name of Dr Li, to determine the source of the virus,
to take responsibility for the spread of the epidemic, to protect citizens’ right to know, and to reflect on the lessons learned from the epidemic are still the focus of attention on social media. But information control is ongoing, especially with regard to the large-scale suppression of the report ‘The one who distributed the whistles’ about Dr Ai, who released the initial diagnostic report which has exacerbated netizens’ anxiety. Therefore, through Dr Li’s microblog, netizens were able to make their voices heard. Striving to make personalized expressions a part of public memory, citizens consciously used individual narratives to oppose (or at least coexist with) the grand unified narrative. Netizens shaped a collective memory around the reminder ‘don’t forget’ in at least three ways.

First, ritually visiting Dr Li’s microblog post and repeatedly calling for his memory to be kept alive. Some netizens visited Dr Li’s post regularly in what became a ‘daily check-in’ ceremony: ‘I’ve been coming to see you for a month... I don’t know you, but just miss you, and even feel revived every day that I come here.’

Some netizens left messages such as ‘never forget’ and ‘someone should take responsibility’, while others felt a sense of security in the collective memory represented by other people’s messages: ‘I am relieved to talk here every day and to see so many people still thinking about you.’ Netizens regarded the memorial itself as a tiny force that can promote positive change: ‘I heard that everyone came to see you before I realized that I could finally do something for you too. I will remember you, thank you.’

Second, recording and archiving. Some netizens have recorded their experiences in a diary to remind themselves not to forget everything that the city of Wuhan experienced; they published articles on social media even if they were likely to be censored. To maintain and disseminate the censored report, ‘The one who distributed the whistles’, netizens relayed, forwarded, saved, and archived screenshots on multiple devices and servers. They ‘told’ Dr Li all this: they reported that the suppression of the article ‘makes people angry and bitterly disappointed and unsettled’, but netizens’ responses ‘make people full of hope’. They left messages saying: ‘I have saved the report and am not afraid of them deleting it’. ‘We preserve the whistle well.’ ‘I have saved the report about Dr Ai. I think I will always remember you, speak what I can actively. I think that’s what you taught me.’

Third, passing the memory on through teaching. Some netizens, such as parents and teachers, passed on the story of Dr Li to their children or students by issuing tests and creating teaching videos and so on. ‘Let children remember that you have given your life for them.’

The comments described in this section act as a witness to the future and can be regarded as a ‘practice of representation that enacts and gives social substance to the discourse of collective memory’. The concept of counter-memory was used to explain resistance against the historical continuity of the official narrative, and netizens’ individual narratives of ‘don’t forget’ were obviously produced as a counter to the standardized memory of hegemonic discourse. Netizens realized that official propaganda was used to downplay the social problems or individual experiences that were easily associated with systemic defects. Facts, such as Dr Li being reprimanded and information not being disclosed, will gradually fade from the official version of the epidemic narrative. The government will focus instead on the construction of a dominant narrative of ‘the whole country actively
resisting the epidemic and winning’, in line with ‘positive publicity’. Therefore, commemorating Dr Li and leaving their own experiences, feelings, and opinions resulted in a version of folk memory, quite different from the official narrative. In open social media environments, even if a user’s comment is submerged within thousands of other comments, it still exists in a visible way. The above explains the importance of why netizens repeatedly visit and leave comments on his final post: to make personal expressions visible. Although these versions of events are fragmented, the ‘epidemic memory’ of thousands of netizens has become a supplementary narrative through repetitive confirmation of the facts that are becoming history. They have ‘turned memory into a process of negotiation’, ‘undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious’.75

**Empowered affective publics**

The comments section of the final post of Dr Li is not only an ‘online condolence room’, but also a place for netizens to create personal stories ranging from their grief over the illness and death of relatives and friends, their brave fight against the epidemic, their joy at graduating from a famous university, to their frustration over unemployment and divorce during the epidemic. Although each narrator’s experience is unique, their stories share a common emotional connection, which enables ‘theories about experiences’ to be formed, thus ‘creating opportunities for negotiating identity and worldviews, for resisting, challenging, and perpetuating the status quo’.76 The personalized affective narration of netizens on microblogs and offline events form a ‘parallel version’ of the story that connects affective publics77 as a ‘mediated structure’ of the event. Netizens experienced ‘warmth’ and ‘kindness’: ‘Everyone can get together to share their sad feelings and profound experiences, even if there are things that are hard to say to others.’78 All types of emotions were tolerated and encouraged: ‘Every time I leave a message on your microblog, someone will always praise me. At that moment, my heart feels very soft. Like me, people who have not forgotten you are cheering each other on.’79 ‘It is not only Dr Li who touched me, but also every kind and pure face in this comments’ section.’80

The attributes of social media connect people, allowing the warmth and goodwill of netizens to become an emotional energy that can be transmitted to others. In essence, this energy cultivates a collective consciousness and a unified atmosphere and acts as a mechanism for self-healing to convert negative emotions, such as sadness, pain and helplessness, into resources for hope and action. As netizens commented, ‘This comments section is the warmest place in this epidemic, thus revealing hope.’81 ‘Dr Li, seeing so many people write diaries here, I have a vague feeling that only with one voice will the world change.’82 Therefore, the process of emotional connection and sharing between individuals on social media is also a process of empowering actors, making emotion the internal driving force of online activism.

**The effect of pressure: Official rectification and recognition politics**

The public outrage over the death of Dr Li forced Chinese authorities to launch a rectification mechanism, including a series of administrative procedures which involved
compensation, apologies, and recognition. Although it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between online discursive practice and the government’s response, the CCP and the Chinese government attach great importance to public opinion on social media. Public opinion departments and Internet information offices have been set up at all levels of government agencies to gauge public opinion hot spots on the Internet; public opinion is judged, graded, and submitted to determine what actions should be taken by leaders. Under these institutional arrangements, the discursive practice has become a visible focus of public opinion and objectively exerts the pressure of public opinion which the government cannot ignore.

On the day of Dr Li’s death, public sentiment poured forth in cyberspace. Someone pointed out the negligence of the local government: ‘The death of Dr Li will make many people lose confidence in the government. Don’t play the political game with people’s lives. People have the right to know the real situation.’

The CCP and the central government made positive gestures of listening to the voices of the masses and safeguarding fairness and justice. On the same day, a special national investigation team was sent to Wuhan to ‘conduct a comprehensive investigation into the relevant issues reflected by the masses involving Dr Li’. It is not common to set up national-level investigation teams for individual incidents. This was an important political statement which is in line with the expectations of Chinese citizens who believe that higher-level authorities can uphold justice on behalf of the people. Then, on 6 March 2020, the National Health Commission commended Li Wenliang as an ‘advanced individual in COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control’, which was a key change from his previous status as a rumour monger. Finally, on 19 March 2020, the investigation team released its conclusion, pointing out that the police station had issued an improper reprimand. It subsequently ordered the Wuhan police station to revoke the reprimand and make a public apology to the family of Dr Li and to issue demerits and warnings to the police officers involved. Although the conclusion of the investigation did not address the deep-seated issues of public concern – which many netizens were disappointed about – at least citizens witnessed a formal apology from the government, which constituted symbolic justice for Dr Li. ‘Recognition of justice’ is an important constituent of the realization of justice for vulnerable (or minority) groups and is part of the ‘politics of recognition’. The counter-hegemonic discourse practice of netizens led to the realization of this political effect to some extent.

However, the official rectification was also a strategic incorporation of public opinion, reflecting the Chinese government’s regime resilience strategy of self-adjustment. First, the corrective action was an administrative process led by the central government; it was coordinated by the local government and did not touch the established policy and institutional framework. It can be regarded as a limited compromise. Previous studies have reflected on the subtle use of information manipulation by superiors and subordinates: it is argued that the central power uses bottom-up citizen participation to enhance accountability (e.g. allowing citizens to express their dissatisfactions online and leave them uncensored and acting on the public’s complaints to punish corrupt officials). In this case, the central investigation team attributed the incident to the mishandling of law enforcement at the primary level, which appeased the public and diverted netizens’ attention.
Second, and more strategically, while recognizing Dr Li as a hero, the government redefined the meaning of hero and incorporated it into the dominant ‘national anti-epidemic hero’ framework. The head of the investigation team highlighted the professionalism of Dr Li in an interview and named him an excellent member of the medical staff. He also stressed that ‘Dr Li is a communist’ and ‘not a so-called anti-system figure’. This obliterated the label of whistle-blower and invalidated the connotations of opposing censorship of speech surrounding the ‘Li Wenliang incident’. Hero refers to the concept of the ‘anti-epidemic hero’ who sacrificed himself for the good of the country, the ruling party, and the people. Scholars have pointed out that the meaning of ambiguous elements can be fixed through articulation, while the process of discourse formation may entail the exclusion of some meanings. Therefore, discourse achieves hegemony by suppressing alternative discourses with fixed meanings. From rumour monger to an ‘advanced individual’ to being awarded the title of Martyr and the ‘China Youth May 4th Medal’, the identity of Li Wenliang had transitioned through a process of purification from stigma to coronation. By framing his heroic status, the government met citizens’ expectations and, to a certain extent, dispelled the hostility in public opinion, although many netizens were deeply disappointed and continued to raise questions on the national mourning day, such as ‘this memorial is too cheap, even if honking all horns in the world, it is less valuable than the whistle’. However, there were no further protests. Therefore, the government strategically used the power of symbolic capital created by the public, transforming it into an example of safeguarding the legitimacy of the system.

Conclusion and discussion

Scholars have debated over the question ‘When can a purely textual presence actually cause political change?’ This study provides a clear response to this question: Chinese netizens took the death of Li Wenliang as an opportunity for public participation, and his final microblog post as a place for collective expression, creating a series of complicated collective narratives imbued with mourning. These individual expressions have established an alternative, counter-hegemonic discourse space through the intermediary role of social media, exerting pressure on the dominant ideology and prompting the government to launch policy agendas that responded to public opinion and rectified deviation.

Chinese netizens established an alternative discursive space through two strategies. First, they launched hidden protests through their outpourings of mourning and avoided suppression by directly challenging official authorities. In this situation, the hidden transcript ‘presses against and tests the limits of what may be safely ventured’; it loosens or blurs the boundary of regulation while continuously questioning the legitimacy of the system. Second, through the special platform provided by social media, netizens integrated private micro-narratives into collective memory, shaping a counter-memory space distinct from the official normative narrative as a political statement. Social media provided support through connectivity, empowering dispersed individuals to form affective publics. The central government, on the other hand, sought to maintain social stability. Through monitoring public opinion in the Li Wenliang case, it perceived that the spontaneous
actions of netizens converged into political pressure and made adaptive responses, blaming the primary-level police station’s mishandling and finally deflecting the public’s anger and strategically integrating different opinions of the public into the framework of the existing political system.

The government and ordinary netizens engaged in a strategic dynamic game. They sought to fix meaning through the discursive struggle to legitimize their demands or status. Citizens did not simply engage in struggle and resistance, nor did the government adopt the logic of control and censorship. The two sides realized a dynamic balance of discourse power through a game: the public obtained ‘recognizable justice’, while the government maintained its own legitimacy and moral authority.

This special case has enriched our understanding of the complexity of digital collective action from multiple perspectives. First, it shows the significant power of almost completely disorganized connective actions and how the collective voice can be heard and reinforced without an initiator, central node, or intermediary. Second, it confirms affection as the decisive driving force for events to become a reality. Extant studies into digital networking action have predominantly focused on specific narrative structures or a personalized framework for action; however, this study has expanded the connotation of the action framework which does not necessarily manifest itself as specific content, such as a unified theme, or a specific form (i.e. a certain hashtag or narrative format), but relies on affects such as sadness and anger, to inject diversified experiences into the realization of mobilization and imaginary community construction. Third, this study clarifies the democratic boundaries of a non-Western style democratic political system in terms of its acceptance of public opinion. When its moral legitimacy is questioned, the government does not suppress or evade public will, but it strategically incorporates public will by responding to demands related to social justice and morality while ignoring radical demands for political reform. In this way, the Chinese government effectively solves the challenge of discourse that questions its authority, which provides a powerful case for the resilience of the regime. It clearly indicates that the existence of the system of governance of online information is not to suppress speech at will, but to detect public opinion in time, resolve contradictions and conflicts by various means, maintain social stability, and consolidate the governing authority. Of course, the number of comments on the final post of Dr Li is still growing, especially at special nodes such as the anniversary of the whistle-blowing event. Therefore, it is still an open space and can become an observation point to further understand digital actions and political disputes in the Chinese context.

Notes
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