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## **COMMEMORATING AS CRITICIZING: HOW LI WENLIANG'S WEIBO HOMEPAGE BECOMES A PLACE FOR QUESTIONING CHINA'S COVID-19 POLICIES AND A "WAILING WALL"**

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### **Introduction**

Li Wenliang, a doctor at Wuhan Central hospital, was one of the first to raise alarm about the outbreak of COVID-19. Warning fellow doctors that an illness resembling severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) could grow out of control in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019, the ophthalmologist was soon summoned by the local police and forced to sign a statement reprimanding his message as a groundless rumor as well as a disturbance to the public order. Two months later, Li Wenliang died after contracting COVID-19 at his workplace, aged 33 years. His death caused shock and outrage across China. Citizens, mostly on social media, expressed their gratitude for Li's candor and devoted front-line service and criticized the response of Wuhan's public sectors and medical officials to his alarm (Green, 2020; Buckley, 2020). In the following years, Li's Weibo (China's equivalent of Twitter) homepage, although the posts had never been updated again, gradually become a place where people mourned, condoled, and commemorated the whistleblower and complained, questioned, and protested against the overstrict government policies relevant to COVID-19 pandemic. Visitors constantly left comments on Li Wenliang's last Weibo post—there are over 1 million comments so far—making it an online "wailing wall."

Memory work in the digital age is not only shaped by the individual and collective remaking of the past at every present but also by the technological affordances and unique features of social media (Smit, 2020). Recent scholarships have examined how the operational logic (Bucher, 2018) of a specific type of social media, including YouTube (Smit et al., 2017), Facebook (Smit et al., 2018), and Reddit (Esteve Del Valle & Smit, 2021), facilitates users to "remember" certain aspects of incidents, events, or celebrities, while "forgetting" others. In a "new memory ecology" (Brown & Hoskins, 2010) enabled by digital technologies, memory work, however, is rarely confined by the boundary of a single social media. It is also not unusual for a citizen to simultaneously use several platforms to acquire information and participate in collective actions (Deluca

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et al., 2016). The commemoration of Li Wenliang is such a case. People visit Li's Weibo homepage (a relatively public space) account to leave short messages and use their own WeChat accounts to (semi-private space) disseminate longer articles. Therefore, to further explore how memory was shaped across social media platforms, this study poses two interrelated research questions:

1. How did the distinct affordances of WeChat and Weibo shape users' commemoration of Li Wenliang?
2. How did the interactions between the users on WeChat and Weibo shape users' commemoration of Li Wenliang?

## **Methods**

WeChat is the most popular social media app in China with roughly 982 million monthly active users, whereas Weibo has about 445 million monthly active users (Quest Mobile, 2021). As a regular user of both WeChat and Weibo for over a decade, the author witnessed the commemoration of Li Wenliang on WeChat and Weibo at many points during the Covid-19 period. Those observations, though far from systemic, at least allow the author to further explore the meaning-making processes related to this topic as a cultural insider (Geertz, 1973). For the specific methods this study used, first, the author closely read all 2014 posts on Li Wenliang's Weibo homepage, seeking to identify what kind of information about Li is publicly available there. He then searched “李文亮” (“Li Wenliang” in Chinese) on WeChat and collected and analyzed the top 145 articles which appeared in the search results. These articles are believed as most widely spread WeChat articles about Li Wenliang because each of them has been viewed over 100,000 times. These articles are relatively comprehensively written, compared to Weibo posts. Lastly, he collected and analyzed users' comments on Li Wenliang's last Weibo post and WeChat articles about Li Wenliang on three distinctive dates: (1) Feb 8, 2020, one day after the death of Li Wenliang; (2) March 28, 2022, the first day of Shanghai's lockdown; (3) December 7, 2022, the day when China's State Council released ten new guidelines, signaling the end of "zero-COVID" restrictions. These dates are all landmark moments during the development of the COVID-19 pandemic in China.

## **Preliminary Findings and Conclusion**

The preliminary findings suggest that Weibo offers a space for users to (1) see the mundane life of Li Wenliang, (2) shortly express their grief and frustration, and (3) interact with other users to remember Li. First, the rich life details of Li Wenliang on his Weibo homepage, including 2014 posts from December 31, 2010, to January 31, 2020, allow the public to revisit many junctures of the developments and changes of Li's life in his twenties to his thirties. This is substantive to the stabilization of the memory of Li as a civilian hero and the creation of sympathy. Second, Weibo provides visitors with a place to comment, repost, and express commemorative feelings. The two posts on the top of Li's Weibo homepage are directly related to COVID-19, his reception of the reprimand, and his death. Such an arrangement facilitates users to recall and reinforce the memories of how, why, and for what Li died, and the controversy and ridiculousness of the authority's reprimand. Third, Weibo is a social media that highlights connectivity

and sharing. Users connect with each other by using hashtags (such as #李文亮), being inspired by others' posts and comments, and reposting and responding to others' posts and comments, thereby forming a sense of community and participation in public events.

The reach of Weibo is relatively limited to young Chinese, whereas the users of WeChat have a broad range of demographics. Thus, the articles on WeChat are crucial for the commemoration of Li to extend to the broader public. Moreover, the communicative networks on Weibo are usually weakly tied, whereas WeChat enables strong-tie communicative networks (Wu & Wall, 2019). The study finds that WeChat allows users to synthesize information about Li Wenliang, provide analysis and criticism, and circulate the memory of Li in users' own social networks.

Lastly, by examining Weibo users' comments and WeChat articles about Li Wenliang on the three particular days. The study finds that the users' activities on Weibo (such as actively sharing and commenting, making it the latest trending topic, etc.) stimulated WeChat users to write and disseminate articles (WeChat articles often started with describing what was happening in Weibo). The circulation of WeChat articles, in return, encouraged more users to visit Li's Weibo homepage and join the commemoration. Together, these two platforms helped stabilize internet users' memory of Li as a whistleblower, a civilian hero, a martyr, and a supporter of free speech and diverse voices, distinguished from the official version (Han, 2023).

To sum up, this study shows how the technological affordances of Weibo and WeChat and the interactions between the users on the two platforms contribute to the memory work of Li Wenliang. It also shows that even in a politically constrictive environment, such as China's media ecology, the space for questioning and protesting still exists, although in more nuanced and precarious ways.

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