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Placing Notes in the Virtual "Western Wall": Online Memorial Culture in Chinese Social Media

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Abstract

Each society has a unique way of understanding death and coping with mourning. The increasing online mourners in China gradually generated a collective reference to the Weibo account that belongs to the dead, the "Western Wall." This project searches for answers to two questions: 1) What characterizes Chinese online memorial practice? And how do these practices compare with those in the Western countries? 2) What aspects of Chinese culture and social conditions can explain Chinese online memorial practices? By combining corpus analysis with thematic analysis on 1,606 comments left on the last tweet of two accounts of deceased Weibo users, this paper found that Chinese online mourners present uniqueness in their commenting behaviors. Not only do they tend to repetitively leave comments, but mourners also use language in a way that wishes for bilateral communication through a broad range of topics. This paper argues that online memorial practice in China represents a social culture where certain topics are considered sensitive and therefore not suitable for discussion in the public. Additionally, the parasocial relationship between the deceased and the bereaved indicates the emotional connection people require in their lives. By leaving comments to the deceased on Weibo, online mourners collectively create a virtual "Western Wall" where they actively communicate to the dead in a way as if they were alive in a digital heaven.

Key Words: Online Memorial Practice, Chinese Social Media, Weibo, Mourning, Death, Parasocial Relationship

1. Introduction

> I have depression, so I will go die. No significant reasons. No one needs to care about my leaving. Goodbye. [我有抑郁症，所以就去死一死，没什么重要的原因，大家不必在意我的离开。拜拜啦。][1]

The above quote is the last post of a Weibo user, @Zoufan [走饭]. Unfortunately, those are also her last words. She posted them at 10:54 am on March 18, 2012, and 15 hours later Jiangning police confirmed on Weibo that the girl committed suicide in the dorm of her university in Nanjing, China. The police received the case report after her post and immediately began searching for the web user. However, when they finally located @Zoufan and attempted to save her, it was too late.[2]

This tragic event happened eight years ago, but her Weibo account remains activated. It attracted much more attention and followers than ever before. People continue visiting her account and leaving comments every minute until now.[3] There are more than one million comments under the last tweet, besides the fact that Weibo automatically deletes the oldest ones when comments for one post exceed one million. Her visitors informally call the above tweets the "tree hole" [树洞 *shudong*], where people can openly talk about the thoughts that normally buried in their minds.[4] The collective behavior presents a unique type of online

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[1] @Zoufan's Account, Weibo, last accessed April 27, 2020. https://www.weibo.com/xiaofan116?is_all=1#1575916696089.

[2] "Zoufan: The Fragile Life Intimidated by the Mind Devil," [走饭 被心魔威逼的脆弱生命], *Ifeng*, published April 13th, 2012, accessed April 27, 2020. http://news.ifeng.com/shendu/nfrwzk/detail_2012_04/13/13872698_0.shtml.

[3] I observed @Zoufan's last post regularly. On average, there is more than one new comment showing up every minute. Last accessed April 27, 2020.

[4] The analogy comes from a widespread fairy tale in the Chinese society. The barber of a Greek god, Midas, found out that Midas had a pair of donkey ears. Threatened to keep the secret, the barber had no way but to dig a tree hole and unloaded the secret in the hole. Thereafter, Chinese people refer to a "tree hole" as a safe place where they can share secrets.

memorial practice that implies the anonymity and privacy, as well as the bilateral communication people require in their lives.

The "tree hole" not only existed in @Zoufan's account but also appeared in other Weibo accounts whose owners had passed. The account @xiaolwl belongs to the whistleblower doctor who died from fighting against COVID-19 in Wuhan, China. Millions of Weibo users have visited his account and left their words under his last tweet since his heartbreaking death on February 7, 2020.[5] Dissimilar from @Zoufan's case, the doctor's account attracted visitors with broader background whereas those of @Zoufan mainly consist of people who suffer from depression and other mental disorders. The increasing online mourners gradually generated another collective reference to the last tweet, the "Western Wall" [哭墙 *Kuqiang*]. It's important to point out the fact that the translated name of the "Western Wall" in Chinese contains no reference to the meaning of "Western" but instead is literally "cry wall." The metaphor compares the online commenting behavior to Jewish people wedging slips of paper that contain their written wishes to God into the sacred historical wall in the Old City of Jerusalem.[6] This reference, instead of "tree hole," certainly lightens the secrecy of the online memorial behavior and strengthens the significant role of the tweet.

What motivates this current research is a search for the reasons behind this online memorial culture on Chinese social media. Although the current COVID-19 situation aggravates the behavior, it also seems different from the West in terms of the content and the

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[5] Verna Yu, "'Hero Who Told the Truth': Chinese Rage over Coronavirus Death of Whistleblower Doctor," *The Guardian*, published 7 Feb 2020, accessed March 21, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/07/coronavirus-chinese-rage-death-whistleblower-doctor-li-wenliang

[6] "Pope Places Note of Peace in Jerusalem's Western Wall," *CBC News*, published May 12, 2009, accessed March 21, 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/pope-places-note-of-peace-in-jerusalem-s-western-wall-1.834018

frequency. What do Chinese people comment on, and what purpose do these comments serve? How does the pandemic affect the practice? These questions motivate and guide me to pursue this research. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the first part presents a brief overview of existing literature on Weibo and online memorial practice, pointing out the gap where this paper fits. Part Two gives the background of the two cases this project studied. Then the next part introduces the methodology, and Part Four delivers findings of the corpus analysis of over 2,814 comments. An overall discussion of the reason behind Chinese online mourning behaviors is given in the end.

2. Literature Review

With a growing user base, Chinese social media, especially Weibo, has become resourceful for academic research on the study of online communities and communication. This section will firstly introduce those research projects that were built on the content and users of Weibo. The second part concentrates on studies of online memorial practice. Because no research has been done on Chinese social media or other internet-based communities, this literature review will review related areas of research on Western societies. The third part includes the cultural mourning practice in the Chinese society. The last part points out the research gap of lacking research upon the online memorial culture in the Chinese social media.

2.1 Chinese Social Media Research

Because of technological and Internet development, social media networks have grown exponentially. At the same time, the prevalent social media usage in the present age provides a vast and publicly accessible database to scholars from different disciplines to analyze human communication. Multiple studies with various research objectives have been done on Weibo by analyzing tweets or interviewing its users. Some collected postings from

Weibo and constructed a linguistic database for the purpose of understanding and predicting

social media users' mental health. For example, Meizhen Lv and colleagues utilized 4,653

Weibo posts and created a Chinese suicide dictionary in order to identify and prevent

potential users from suicidal attempts.[7] Zhenkun Zhou and his team analyzed online profiles

of 293 active Weibo users and built up a machine learning model, by which the personality

and mental health conditions of more than 7,000 users were successfully examined and

tested.[8] Others have observed and investigated discussions on the social media platform

related to certain social topics, in order to examine the public relations and opinions. Yan

Wang investigated 1,359 posts on Weibo and concluded the public online communication

and opinions about the advocacy of "cultural confidence" by Chinese government and

leadership.[9] There are also studies that directionally focused on Weibo users. By conducting

individual interviews and carrying out surveys, researchers acquired first-hand information

and responses on their specific inquiries. For example, Ziying Tan and other scholars

recruited 17 Weibo users for individual interviews and 4,222 users for a survey to reflect the

influence and effectiveness of direct online message interventions to people with suicidal

tendencies.[10] As these literatures implied, mental health and online communications are two

of the mostly discussed topics among the abundant studies that were conducted on Weibo.

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[7] Meizhen Lv, et al., "Creating a Chinese Suicide Dictionary for Identifying Suicide Risk on Social Media," *PeerJ* 3, e1455 (2015), doi:10.7717/peerj.1455

[8] Zhenkun Zhou, Ke Xu, and Jichang Zhao, "Extroverts Tweet Differently from Introverts in Weibo," *EPJ Data Sci.* 7, no. 18 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-018-0146-8

[9] Yan Wang, "Intertextual and Hypermodal Representations of China's Cultural Confidence in Social Media Communication," Critical Arts 32, no. 5-6, (2018), 119-124, doi:10.1080/02560046.2018.1514415

[10] Ziying Tan, et al. "Designing Microblog Direct Messages to Engage Social Media Users with Suicide Ideation: Interview and Survey Study on Weibo," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 19, no. 12 (2017). doi:10.2196/jmir.8729

2.2 Western Centric Studies of Online Memorial Practice

The studies discussed above present a brief picture of the academic research that has been done with the Chinese social media platform, either by analyzing Weibo content or interviewing its users. However, the research on online mourning practices in China is scarce not only on Weibo but also on other Chinese social media networks. By contrast, similar studies are prevalent in Western societies. Leaving comments on the virtual legacies of the deceased has been considered as a new way of online memorial practice and widely discussed, especially using Facebook.[11] The increasing online mourning has resulted in both negative and positive impacts on social media.[12] Although there are few inappropriate commenting and trolling behaviors observed in the memorial pages, many people still found this online communicative practice helped them cope with loss and ease the grief.[13]

Inspired by Lisbeth Klastrup's study of six Facebook memorial pages in Denmark, this paper concurs with Klastrup's claim that "digital social media are, in many ways, adding new dimensions to the ways in which we interact with each other, both before and after death."[14] The digital remains belonging to people who passed away provides online mourners not only a connecting object but also an easily accessible arena for mourning and

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[11] Rebecca Kern, Abbe Forman, and Gisela Gil-Egui, "R.I.P.: Remain in Perpetuity. Facebook Memorial Pages," *Telematics and Informatics* 30, no. 1 (2013): 2, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2012.03.002

[12] Alice Marwick and Nicole Ellison, "'There Isn't Wifi in Heaven!' Negotiating Visibility on Facebook Memorial Pages," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 3 (2012): 380, doi: 10.1080/08838151.2012.705197

[13] Whitney Phillips, "LOLing at Tragedy: Facebook Trolls, Memorial Pages and Resistance to Grief Online." *First Monday* 16, no.12 (2011), doi:10.5210/fm.v16i12.3168

[14] Lisbeth Klastrup, "'I Didn't Know Her, but...': Parasocial Mourning of Mediated Deaths on Facebook RIP Pages," *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 21, no. 1-2 (2015): 146, doi: 10.1080/13614568.2014.983564

memorializing.[15] Social media networks have expanded temporal, spatial, and social

dimensions on the topic of death and grief.[16] The expansion has become more notable during

the recent outbreak of COVID-19. With "shelter-in-place" and similar self-quarantine

policies that have been issued by more governments, the worst part for people who have lost

somebody during the global pandemic is that they might not be able to be physically present

in either their last moments or the bereavement ceremonies of their loved ones. Some

countries have announced policies that directly affect the memorial rituals due to the high

contagiousness. For example, in Italy, many patients who died from the COVID-19 had to

"face death alone" because of the scarce resource and the labor-capital in healthcare and

funeral service.[17]

2.3 Chinese Mourning Practices

Each society has its unique way of understanding death and coping with mourning, as

Brubaker stated that "cultural beliefs are deeply embedded within human experiences of grief

and practices around death."[18] Dissimilar to the Western cultural experience to death of

showing one's condolence by commenting "rest in peace," Chinese people tend to express

more of their comforts to the bereaved in memorial practices. In funerals, instead of saying

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[15] Jo Bell, Louis Bailey and David Kennedy, "'We Do It to Keep Him Alive': Bereaved Individuals' Experiences of Online Suicide Memorials and Continuing Bonds," *Mortality* 20, no.4 (2015): 376. doi: 10.1080/13576275.2015.1083693

[16] Jed Brubaker, Gillian Hayes, and Paul Dourish, "Beyond the Grave: Facebook as a Site for the Expansion of Death and Mourning," *The Information Society* 29, no. 3 (2013): 160-161, doi: 10.1080/01972243.2013.777300

[17] Bjørn Nansen, et al., "Small Funerals, Online Memorials and Grieving from Afar: The Coronavirus ss Changing How We Care for the Dead," *Find an Expert at the University of Melbourne*, published Mar 25, 2020, accessed April 2, 2020. https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/news/11634-small-funerals--online-memorials-and-grieving-from-afar--the-coronavirus-is-changing-how-we-care-for-the-dead

[18] Brubaker, 152.

"rest in peace" in Chinese, 安息 *Anxi*, to the deceased, Chinese people would tell the bereaved the phrase, 节哀顺变 *Jie'ai Shunbian*.[19] The phrase literally means "restrain sorrow to adapt to the change" that relatively places more weights on the communication with the living than the condolence toward the dead, as in Everett Yuehong Zhang's words, "focusing on death" versus "focusing on living."[20]

2.4 Research Gap

The ample attention and discussion over the online memorial culture in academia within Western contexts have addressed the emerging impact of technology and the global pandemic on our understanding of death and grief.[21] Giving that China has a large population and with its social media censorship of Facebook, this research aims at filling the gap of online memorial culture on Chinese social media, especially under the influence of COVID-19 when people are not allowed to participate in physical memorial services in many cities. Whether the comments left on social media to the deceased are more respectful or more vicious is not the focus of this research. Instead, the focus is on what characterizes the commenting behavior in comparison to Western countries and why do people choose to comment under the selected account.

Hence, based on previous literature, this project asks following two questions:

RQ1: What characterizes Chinese online memorial practice? And how do these practices compare with those in the Western countries?

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[19] Everett Yuehong Zhang, "Mourning," in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. by Didier Fassin (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2012), 266. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118290620.ch15.

[20] Ibid., 267-268.

[21] Dorthe Christensen and Stine Gotved, "Online Memorial Culture: An Introduction," *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 21, no.1-2 (2015): 2, doi:10.1080/13614568.2015.988455

RQ2: What aspects of Chinese culture and social conditions can explain Chinese online memorial practices?

3. Background of the Selected Weibo Accounts

In this study, Weibo is used as the representative of social media networks in China. It is one of the largest social media sites in China, whose products and functions are similar to those of Twitter in the U.S. Users can post microblogs with/without other media carriers, such as pictures and songs. They can also reply to and repost others' microblogs. Referring to its official 2018 Q4 report, Weibo had more than 462 million monthly active and 200 million daily active users.[22] While Facebook, Twitter, and more western mainstream social media platforms are banned inside China, Weibo is the most influential and widely accepted microblogging network. Hence, it's significant and representative to examine the online memorial culture through analyses over tweets on Weibo.

The selected accounts are two of the most well-known virtual "Western Walls" on Weibo. The account @Zoufan represents those that existed before the outbreak of COVID-19, while @xiaolwl stands for those that emerged during the pandemic. Millions of Weibo users frequently visit the two accounts and leave comments. The majority of them talk in a way as if the deceased were their close friend and if the listener were still alive in a *digital heaven*.[23] Table 1 covers the basic information of the two Weibo accounts under discussion and their last tweets.

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[22] "2018 Weibo User Development Report," *Sina Weibo Data Center*, published March 15, 2019, accessed March 31, 2020. https://data.weibo.com/report/reportDetail?id=433

[23] Tony Walter, "Old Mourners, New Mourners: Online Memorial Culture as A Chapter in the History of Mourning," *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 21, (2015): 10–24, doi:10.1080/ 13614568.2104.983555

Table 1. Two Weibo Accounts' Overview

Accounts	Last posting date	#Comments	Themes of the comments
@Zoufan	March 18, 2012	100M+	Mental suffering, suicidal tendencies, etc.
@xiaolwl	February 1, 2020	900,000+	News, greeting, resolutions for living, etc.

The account @Zoufan has a longer history. Four journalists from *The Paper*, one of the leading news outlets in China, examined 53,027 comments left within one month and published a special analytic report in September 2019. In these comments, 13,265 talked about personal emotions, by using keywords such as sad, unhappy, and desperate; additionally, 6,049 messages discuss the topic of living and/or death. A significant percentage of comments under the last tweet described commenters' suicidal attempts and thoughts that they could not share with others through other measures. They treated @Zoufan's account as a therapist, a safe place to pour out their secrets and stress that were barely able to be shared with anyone else.

On the contrary, the comments under @xiaolwl's last tweet contain broader themes more than suicidal thoughts and mental disturbances. Below is what was left on February 1, 2020:

> Today, the nucleic acid test was positive. The result was settled, and the diagnosis was finally confirmed. [今天核酸检测结果阳性，尘埃落定，终于确诊了。][24]

Six days after, the owner of the account @xiaolwl, Doctor Wenliang Li, died from COVID-19 in Wuhan Central Hospital on February 7. Considered as the whistleblower of the pandemic, he was one of the first group of doctors who detected and reported the infectious disease in China. However, he got warned for his alarming speech and had to sign a legal

[24] @xiaolwl's Account, Weibo, accessed on March 21, 2020.
https://www.weibo.com/u/1139098205?sudaref=www.weibo.com&is_hot=1

paper stating he "had breached the law and had seriously disrupted social order" at the early stage of the outbreak.[25] His death triggered a broader participation in the online memorial practice on Weibo. The comments under his tweet contain much broader topics compared to those of @Zoufan. Some people post multiple times in a day and share their lives in a way of talking to a close friend. Others would just check in and say "good night" to the doctor as if he were still alive. The detailed analysis of those comments is given in the following sections.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining corpus analysis for the quantitative and thematic analysis for the qualitative analysis. The former is "based on analysis of a large and principled collection of natural texts, known as a *corpus.*"[26] The affluent text resource on social media naturally provides the ingredients for constructing the corpus and makes it possible for investigating the research topic within the defined context. The latter is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data," which allows the structured scrutinization of the corpus.[27] My project followed this method throughout the qualitative analysis of the constructed data set.

The data items in the corpus came from the two Weibo accounts discussed earlier, @Zoufan and @xiaolwl. The comments under the last post of each account were manually collected by the author to build the corpus. More than half (54%) were commented and gathered on April 5, 2020, which was the day of Qingming festival [清明节], a Chinese

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[25] Verna Yu, "Hero Who Told the Truth."

[26] Douglas Biber and Randi Reppen, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics*, ed. Douglas Biber and Randi Reppen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

[27] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 79. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

festival when people commemorate ancestors through various rituals. Because this research focuses on the online memorial practice, it is significant to observe people's behavior on the day that is officially created for mourning. For comparison, the rest of the data was collected on dates six days before and after the Qingming Festival, March 30 and April 11. In total, 1,606 comments left on the three day consist of the final corpus, in which 526 come from the last tweet of @Zoufan and 1,080 from that of @xiaolwl. Similar to Twitter, Weibo users give themselves pseudonyms when registering for accounts. Hence, their usernames are used in the following discussion without further alternations. All comments presented in the following sections were translated by the author.

The whole analysis followed a communication practice framework inspired by the respective works of Kern and Klastrup.[28] They both have analyzed posts on Facebook memorial pages with their distinct coding schemes. Two themes, personal deixis and "RIP" (rest in peace), appeared in both of their schemes. This paper's coding framework adopted these two codes and also came up with other five themes. The final framework contains seven initial themes, namely: Greeting, Condolence, Deixis, Emotions, Feelings, Inquiries, and News (see Table 2 below). After the corpus construction, keywords were chosen as representatives of four themes (Greeting, Condolence, Deixis, and Inquiries) and counted among the data set by the counting function in Excel. The frequency of selected keywords for the four themes were calculated and then presented in the table. Due to the complexity and diversity of the expression of the other three themes, they were examined later during the thematic analysis when each data item was examined individually. There are too many ways of expressing one's emotions, feelings, and inquiries, hence no keywords but examples of the three themes were given.

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[28] Kern, "R.I.P.," 6; Klastrup, "I Didn't Know Her," 157-158.

Table 2. Initial Analyzing Codes[29]

Initial Themes	Keywords/Examples	Count (%)
Greeting	"Good night"	488 (42%) [only in @xiaolwl]
Condolence	"RIP"	2 (0.2%) [only in @xiaolwl]
Deixis	"I"	686 (42.7%)
	"You"	305 (19%)
	"She/He"	112 (7%)
Emotions	"Sad", "Happy", "desperate" …	n/a
Feelings	"I miss you," "life is so hard" …	n/a
Inquiries	"What should I do when…"	n/a
News	"Pandemic"	25 (2.3%)

Next, each data item in the corpus was individually reviewed and categorized into the seven themes by the author. Aiming at answering research questions, the thematic analysis following the structure of proposed by Braun and Clarke.[30] Finally, the seven initial themes, together with the postings classified to each of them were further examined and compared to generate the commonly identified theme among all of them.

5. Findings

5.1 The Patterns of Chinese Online Mourning Culture

Different from findings in the existing studies on the Facebook memorial page, this research discovered that Chinese internet mourners frequently visit the same account and leave comments under the same post on Weibo. There are large number of "loyal fans" [铁粉 Tiefen] existed in both accounts of @Zoufan and @xiaolwl. The "loyal fan" badge indicates the user has left more than five comments to the post in the past 30 days and is automatically

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[29] No keywords were chosen for the three themes (Emotions, Feelings, and Inquiries) is because the expression for them are too diversified. For example, there are multiple ways of showing sadness with different Chinese characters.

[30] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis," 87.

issued by Weibo.[31] Many comments contain the meaning along the lines of, "I haven't been here for a few days." For example:

> "…It's been a few days since my last visit…" (by @Airensilier under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

> "Fan, I haven't been here for a while." (by @WZYAFX under @Zoufan's last tweet)

> "Dr. Li, I'll come back another day for chatting. It's time for sleep now." (by @nanwuqing under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

> "I'm here again tonight to say 'good night' to you, doctor!" (by @Luyv under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

> "Fan, I'm back again. I'm so pity." (by @ imbeiqi under @Zoufan's last tweet)
> "I didn't expect to see so many people here again. I have many complicated emotions now. Good night!" (by @Airensilier under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

> "Heartbreaking every time I visit you." (by @Wufa under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

There are two features shared by these postings. First, Chinese users tend to repetitively visit the same account and leave multiple comments to the deceased on Weibo. Second, there is a sense of guilt among this type of comments that the speaker sounds like they feel sorry for not visiting or commenting on the tweet more often. Contrary to the single-time visiting on the Facebook memorial page that was observed in the Western societies, Chinese mourners not only constantly come back to and comment on the virtual "Western Wall" but also speak in a way that contains both the closeness of frequent talking to the deceased and the guilt of not being able to visit more often.

5.2 Final Theme: The Need for Bilateral Communication

The postings on the virtual "Western Wall" covered a broad range of topics. As explained earlier in the Methodology, seven themed categories were generated at first.

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[31] "The Introduction of Loyal Fans," Weibo, accessed April 5, 2020, https://kefu.weibo.com/faqdetail?id=20848. Due to the fact that all data items in the corpus were saved by their text contents, the badge, as a picture, couldn't be saved or detected by the counting function in Excel. Hence, it was not possible to present the quantitative result.

Keywords for four themes were chosen and counted through the corpus. The results are listed in Table 2. After the initial counting process, each data item in the corpus was individually reviewed and categorized into the seven themes as well. Next, the further thematic analysis of the keywords counting results (quantitative) and the individual posting (qualitative) was conducted. Based on similarities and distinctions of the seven themes, this paper selected and organized four themes (highlighted in the Table 2) out of the seven into three thematic subsections, which constructed the main body of the following argument. The dominating tone observed among the postings and deduced from the process of the thematic analysis is the need for bilateral communication where both parties participate and exchange information, which is also supported by the quantitative result. The detailed analysis is presented below.

5.2.1 Greeting versus Condolence

One distinctive feature that stands out from the data is that around half of the comments under Doctor Li's last tweet said "good night [晚安]" (42%). However, only 2 out of the 1,606 comments contained the word "rest in peace" in Chinese, 安息. Compared to showing condolence for the dead, the usage of "good night" seems to underscore an intimacy between the both sides of the communication, especially giving the fact that most of the commenters didn't know the deceased before death.

Greeting is not limited to "good morning/night" but contains similar ways of greeting acquaintances in real life.

> "Kid, how are you? It's been a few days since my last visit. Tonight, aunt [the commenter refers to herself] couldn't fall asleep. Hence I came here and would like to spend some time with you." (by @Airensilier under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

> "How are you, Fanfan? It's been a while since my visit. I was too indulgent with myself earlier." (by @23 and 36 under @Zoufan's last tweet)

Only by reading these texts or examining what they said and how they said it can one tell that the commenters were actually greeting someone who already passed away. The word choice and the message content in the observed comments showed no in speaking to someone who is deceased (versus alive), which implies the commenter's emotional dependency on the deceased and spiritual attachments to the two accounts. On one hand, by greeting with the question, "How are you?" the mourners are somehow expecting responses rather than the classic way of praying for the deceased with "rest in peace." On the other hand, they voluntarily incorporated many personal details in the comments, such as the user @Airensilier, who referred herself as Dr. Li's aunt, who shared her insomnia condition and explicitly expressed her personal preference of visiting the account.[32] The details given by the commenters add another layer of closeness to their communications and expectations to build emotional connections.

5.2.2 Personal Deixis

The choices of personal deixis are worth noting among the collected comments. Within those containing clear usage of personal deixis, more than 42% comments used the first person ("I" 我) and 19% adopted the second person ("you" 你), while only 7% employed the third person ("she" 她 and "he" 他). Interestingly, comments under @Zoufan's last tweet have a higher frequency of using the first person (46%) and a larger range between the usage of the first person and that of the second person, compared with those under @xiaolwl (29% vs 18%).

Mourners of @Zoufan tend to convey more personal feeling and to share more details about their lives, such as:

> "I went to re-examine my medical conditions and get my medication today. The psychiatrist asked how I am. Immediately, I began crying. The psychiatrist

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[32] In everday spoken language, Chinese people tend to address senior female as "aunt" and senior male as "uncle" as showing respects to the senior.

> asked me to do the genetic test next month to see which medicine will be more effective on me. I spend about 200 dollars on medication every month. But I feel nothing has changed." (by @Tangxiansheng under @Zoufan's last tweet)

> "I'd like to hide under my parents' arms and cry, but my mom is also weak, and my dad is as stubborn as air-dried bark. I always have those kinds of dreams. I want to hide in the dream without waking up. I'm afraid of crying too much and losing my vision after waking up." (by @Leonardo under @Zoufan's last tweet)

> "I said yes to a divorced guy with a kid. I am not into him or willing to be a stepmother, but I have to bear with the reality. I need to provide for my old grandmother and unwell mother. If asked before coming to this world, I'd rather not be born in the first place. This world treats me so badly. My favored one is too good to marry me while I don't want to be with the disliked one. Too tired, I'm barely able to support myself physically, why push me to support a family?" (by @w23333 under @Zoufan's last tweet)

All three online mourners articulated what happened to them in the offline time. There is nothing related to @Zoufan in the content but the content is all about the commenter. Their postings read like the answer to the question, "How are you doing?" except that no one was asking. Similar to these three examples, the majority of comments left in @Zoufan's last tweet was in the first person and revealed the commenters' private and personal thoughts, which also matched the findings in the doctor's tweet, for example:

> "Doctor Li, my grandfather passed away. I wasn't there when he died. There are so many words I haven't told him. I'm so sad. I miss him so much." (by @Xika under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

> "Hey brother, I'm telling you that I fall in love with a girl. But she already has a boyfriend. Sad… I feel really sad and miserable recently. Are you listening?" (by @Xiatiangeiyuwo under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

All these comments discussed posters' experience and feelings in the first person and addressed other people than the deceased in the third person. For example, @Xika referred to his grandfather as "he" and @Xiatiangeiyuwo used "she" to stand for the girl he falls in love with. In other words, the commenters tried to converse with the deceased about the third

person in their lives, which is different from the findings in the existing literature.[33] Besides, judging from all the postings listed above, the third person was often the one who causes the commenter's suffering. No matter the reason, the commenters decided to pour out their complaints and sadness to the deceased. Hence, the virtual "Western Wall" here seems to have functioned as an emotional foundation that allows and wishes for the establishment of a dual-way communication between the commenter and the receiver.

5.2.3 Inquiry and Help

Another unique observation is that Weibo users tend to ask the deceased for answers to many questions and for assistance as if the account owner were still alive. The topics of asking questions and looking for help present such a diversity that there are lacking common keywords that could be used to search through the data set. Since @xiaolwl was a doctor, many questions addressed to him are health problems or related to the COVID-19, such as:

> "I'm come here and ask every day. Is there anything that has not been reported yet? On January 1, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has notified the U.S. for the virus situation. How comes that you were warned by the officials on the same day?" (by @fortunesexy under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

> "Doctor Li, how does working night shift damage the body?" (by @ipone4 under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

> "I'm starving! Doctor Li, I want to make noodles for myself. But it's too late. Will I gain weight if eating at this time?" (by @Liangzhishuda under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

Some people consulted issues regarding their personal relationships. For instance:

> "I'm hungry, Doctor Li. My mind is full of my ex-girlfriend. What should I do?" (by @Softie9 under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

> "What should I do? He already has a girlfriend. While saying that I don't care, honestly I couldn't live with this fact." (by @Huanjie under @Zoufan's last tweet)

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[33] The usage of third person on Facebook is often attributed to the deceased, such as "she [the deceased] seemed a sweet girl; I'm praying for her family" in Kern, "R.I.P.," 8.

There are also questions related to the personal choice on the career path, such as:

> "Doctor Li, the pandemic affected global economics, especially in my industry, international trade. My family wants me back home to be a teacher, which is more stable. But I love the international trade industry. I like to go around the world, but I also know it might be the last chance for me to enter the national system as a teacher. I don't what to do, waiting for the economic recovery or go back home to be a teacher. Can you give me some insights, please? Thank you!" (by @fortunesexy under @xiaolwl's last tweet)

On the publicly accessible digital remains of the deceased, the commenters behave in a relatively unusual measure of mourning or grief: asking questions that are addressed to the dead. Moreover, this style of communication is also collectively accepted, because a great number of different users continually adopt the style and leave various questions. This observation is in accordance with and further reinforces the earlier finding that commenters wish for responses to their postings and for communication with others, which is considered as the need for bilateral communication.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Regarding RQ1, the repetitive commenting behavior illustrated by significant number of users and rich topics appeared in comments under the studied tweets indeed give a unique narrative to the Chinese online memorial practice. Chinese memorial cultures have the feature of focusing on the future and deliberately neglecting the death, which is also identified in the online mourning practice on Weibo. Online mourners tend to talk rather than pray, and the contents of comments are more related to the commenter than to the deceased. The comments on Weibo contain mourners' feelings and emotions that can hardly be shared with somebody or somewhere else, which implies much more meaning than simply showing condolences (as with the case in Western countries). In this sense, the deceased Weibo account is more similar to the virtual "Western Wall," where the mourners often attribute more emotional connections, than to the virtual "spontaneous shrines," where the passers-by

merely visit without making personal attachments.[34] Furthermore, contrary to Klastrup's observation that "comments here seem to function much more like a candle or a flower left by a stranger, never to return to the site again," the paper found that Chinese online mourners also have a higher frequency of re-visiting and commenting on the same accounts on Weibo.[35]

In terms of RQ2, it is worthwhile to dig deep into the reason behind the formation of the virtual "Western Wall." Two major driving factors contribute to the acceleration of online mourning over the past decade and the uniqueness of this cultural practice in the Chinese society: one is the *push factor,* which refers to certain sensitive topics that are not suitable to be discussed freely in public without anonymity, and another is the *pull factor*, which stands for the parasocial relationship that places undeniable distances between the dead and the living. The push-pull framework is often used in the studies of immigration and diaspora movement.[36] Business and management experts also apply the push-pull theory to analyze motivations behind certain customer behaviors and entrepreneurial innovations.[37] The framework is borrowed and adapted here to describe two main types of the causes that drive the formation of the unique virtual "Western Wall."

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[34] Klastrup, "I Didn't Know Her," 161.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Jeffery Morgan, et al., "Location is Surprisingly a Lot More Important Than You Think": A Critical Thematic Analysis of Push and Pull Factor Messaging Used on Caribbean Offshore Medical School Websites," *BMC Med Educ* 17, no. 99 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-017-0936-x

[37] Robert Zmud, "An Examination of 'Push-Pull' Theory Applied to Process Innovation in Knowledge Work," *Management Science* 30, no. 6 (1984): 727-728. www.jstor.org/stable/2631752.

6.1 Push Factor: Sensitive Topics

One of the most recognizable features shared by many comments is the sensitivity of the content. For example, the cause of the tragic death of @Zoufan, depression, as one of the most critical public health issues worldwide, is a taboo in Chinese society. According to the latest report on mental health by the World Health Organization in 2019, more than 54 million people suffer from depression in China. Suicide, as one vital consequence of severe depression, is "the second leading cause of death in 15-29-year-olds."[38] However, due to the shame and stigma attributed to the mental illness in Chinese society, people who have suicidal tendencies still lack social support to reveal their conditions or seek help from professionals. In many cases, the suicide attempt was neglected as "merely attention-seeking gestures" that stop the sufferer from voicing out.[39]

While more than 80 percent of the Weibo users are under 30, falling in the age range that has the highest risk of suicide, it is sufficient to infer that many users may suffer from mental illness and have suicidal tendencies.[40] In fact, there were comments revealing suicidal tendencies within the corpus collected in this studies, and there were cases where individuals used Weibo as a platform to broadcast their suicide attempts.[41] Despite the unfortunate stories, because of the anonymity of posting and commenting, the social media network could play a significantly positive role in helping to alleviate the mental health condition. For example, Weibo became an "anonymous group," where people who suffer could reach out

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[38] World Health Organization, "Depression," published December 4, 2019.

[39] Ang Li et al., "Attitudes towards Suicide Attempts Broadcast on Social Media: An Exploratory Study of Chinese Microblogs," *PeerJ* 3, e1209 (2015), doi: 10.7717/peerj.1209

[40] "2018 Weibo User Development Report."

[41] Ibid.; King-Wa Fu, et al., "Responses to a Self-Presented Suicide Attempt in Social Media: A Social Network Analysis," *Crisis* 34, no. 6 (2013): 406. doi:10.1027/0227-5910/a000221

for communication. For adolescents, whose parents refuse to accept their problems or take them to the hospital, the internet is easily accessible. For adults, who believe their family and friends cannot bear their secrets, Weibo is open and safe. Hence the sensitive topics contributed to one vital reason why there were more than one million comments left under @Zoufan's last tweet.

6.2 Pull Factor: Parasocial Relationship

This factor attributes to the unneglected distance, both physical and abstract, between the deceased and the living on social media. It similar to the concept of the parasocial relationship where "a pseudo-friendship with a character or celebrity that is characterized by a sense of closeness and familiarity with the media figure, which resembles the type of intimacy felt in typical social relationships."[42] The narrow sense of a parasocial relationship is often witnessed between celebrities and their fans. The broad sense could describe the interpersonal connection on social media networks.[43] Because of functions such as "follow" and "connect" on platforms like Weibo and Facebook, any individuals could have parasocial relationships with other people similar to what fans have with celebrities.

The personal digital remains of the deceased on a public website brought more participants into the memorial practice beyond the bereaved who knew the deceased before death. Hence, online mourners built an imagined parasocial relationship with the social media account owners who passed away based on the online tweets. The comments also presented a commonly identified closeness and intimacy, which might be the result from the reason that the commenter lack the similar emotional connections with other people elsewhere in their

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[42] Elizabeth Cohen and Cynthia Hoffner, "Finding Meaning in a Celebrity's Death: The Relationship between Parasocial Attachment, Grief, and Sharing Educational Health Information Related to Robin Williams on Social Network Sites," *Computers in Human Behavior* 65, (2016): 645. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2016.06.042

[43] Ibid., 646.

lives. This parasocial relationship constantly contributed to the increasing number of comments that emerged in the virtual "Western Wall."

6.3 Conclusion

By utilizing corpus analysis with thematic analysis on 1,606 comments left on the last tweet of two accounts that belonged to deceased users, this paper found that Chinese mourners present uniqueness in their online memorial behaviors. Not only do they tend to repetitively leave comments on the digital remains of the deceased, Weibo users also speak in a way that wishes for responses and for bilateral communication through discussions of broad topics. Therefore, this paper argues that firstly, online memorial practice in China represents a social culture where certain topics are considered as sensitive and therefore not suitable for discussion in the public, and secondly, the parasocial relationship between the deceased and the bereaved indicates the emotional connection people require in their lives. By leaving comments to the deceased on Weibo, online mourners collectively create a virtual "Western Wall" where they actively communicate to the dead as if they are alive in a digital heaven.

This research aims at expanding the academic discourse on digital death, mourning, and memorial practices. The way one society dealing with death and grief is largely related to its dominating culture. Since no other study has been done on online memorial practices in Chinese social media, it is significant to examine social and cultural collective practices with interdisciplinary perspectives when online mourning already became an unneglectable phenomenon in the society, especially during the present COVID-19 pandemic. While the analysis in the Chinese setting sheds light on the cultural differences in memorial practice and attitudes, it would also intrigue more related research topics about Chinese online culture and social media.

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