

# The Rite of Passage and Digital Mourning in Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary*

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## Abstract

Using Van Gennep's theory of Rite of Passage as its framework, this article examines the impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Chinese culture as depicted through death and mourning in Wang Fang's (penname Fang Fang) recently published *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City*. As part of the efforts to control the outbreak, the Chinese government took over the managing of the deceased, which triggered heated discussions on Chinese social media. Fang Fang's diary, originally written as daily entries on Chinese social media platform Weibo, serves as a voice for those suffering during the pandemic, mediating between personal accounts, accounts of friends, family and those living in Wuhan during the pandemic. These flesh out how the virus has not only been disturbing for Chinese people's lives but also disrupted the death rites and mourning rituals for those who have passed. Our article infuses a digital ontological reading with an anthropological twist that helps to understand how the diary mitigates the disturbances to mourning rituals inside and outside the confines of digital metaphysics. We argue that the digital diary mitigates these disruptions by allowing Chinese people to nourish their sorrow by identifying with the symbolic rites of passage and mourning rituals online at the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan. In doing so, this article examines three stages of rite of passage, including separation, liminality and integration as they unfold in the diary, through which discourses and subjectivities based on collective

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and individual traumatic experiences are built, as a form of digital mourning that could reconcile both the official and the alternative voices of anonymous narratives about the handling of this crisis.

### Keywords

Wuhan Diary, rites of passage, digital subjectivities, digital mourning, COVID-19, death, commemoration, reintegration, reconciliation, coronavirus

## Introduction

Wang Fang (henceforth Fang Fang) is a Chinese writer born in 1955. After attending Wuhan University in 1978 to study Chinese, she began to write poetry in 1982 and launched her first novel *Da Peng Che Shang* (大篷车上). It was her masterpiece *Feng Jing* (风景) that led her to win the 1978–1988 award for national outstanding medium-length novel. Among China's Hubei writers, Fang Fang is well-known for her dedication to expressing the historical and regional culture of Wuhan. Using themes such as urban scenery with strong local characteristics, Chinese language, citizen life and historical changes of Wuhan, she has not only added a different colour to Chinese urban literature but also transcended local consciousness.

We chose Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary for our analysis even though there are numerous sources on how the deaths and crisis during the lock-down period of Wuhan were handled, including official media outlets and other valuable websites testimonies such as independent curated platforms or blogospheres. State media such as Xinhua press or CCTV's media channel widely commented on the crisis at that time but did not mitigate the disturbances of the mourning rituals and state policies to contain the virus as Fang Fang did. Compared to some other Chinese writers who blogged about the lockdown including feminist activists Guo Jing's focus on domestic violence and Ai Xiaoming's radical anti-government views, the pandemic has served Fang Fang to constructively give a broader voice to both China with its positive and negative approach to the pandemic as well as to the sufferers of the coronavirus (Fumian, 2020). First appearing as online diary entries on Chinese social media platform Weibo between January and March 2020, Fang Fang's work could not only potentially better restore a completer picture of the initial impacts of COVID-19 in Wuhan, but the fact that it had such a huge repercussion in China and to a certain extent abroad, particularly with its translation and publication in English, which revealed to a broader audience what the rest of the world were about to experience. Wuhan was the epicentre of the pandemic, and Fang Fang is one of the most influential and related writers, *symbolically and physically* in the city since she has lived there her entire life and during the lockdown. Fang Fang was also former chair of Hubei's Writers' Association, and as such we believe her prominent position as a local writer and accountability to tell the story of Wuhan was significantly strong and relevant. Fang Fang is an insider of the then status quo in Wuhan, and this makes her diary unique and this research significant given the fact that few studies have examined recent competing narratives of COVID-19 with a few exceptions (Litzinger & Ni, 2021; Sier, 2021; Zhang & Chow 2021; Zhang, 2021). Fang Fang's digital diary provides a deeper understanding of how both people in society and digital media reflected on China's efforts to contain the coronavirus, and the serious disruption of these policies to traditional mourning rituals. We argue that the digital diary mitigates these disruptions by allowing Chinese people to nourish their sorrow by identifying with the symbolic rites of passage and mourning rituals online at the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan. In doing so, this article examines three stages of rite of passage, including separation, liminality and integration as they appear in the diary,

through which discourses and subjectivities based on collective and individual traumatic experiences are built, as a form of digital mourning that could reconcile both the official and the alternative voices of anonymous narratives about the handling of this crisis.

Fang Fang's 60 daily entries started on January 25th, 2020, on the Chinese social media platform Weibo, with some accounts facing censorship by the Chinese government but others remaining and reposted on another platform WeChat. Her diary became a space of comfort, where people inside and outside China could follow almost simultaneously what was occurring in Wuhan from a third-person account, therefore making history as it was unfolding. Since this time, the collection of her digital diary entries in Weibo became known as *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City* (hereafter Wuhan Diary). It is surprising that the recent release of this book has received negative press in China due to its translation and publication abroad. By apparently feeding the Western world with negative images of Wuhan and the government's response to COVID-19, among China's emerging cyber-nationalist population, Fang Fang has been accused of criticizing, humiliating, and subjecting the Chinese to foreign insult (BBC, 2020). However, one only has read her work to know that there is much more depth and complexity to her discussion of Wuhan and the government's response to COVID-19.

Yu (2020) has interpreted the intention of Fang Fang's diary to bear witness of what happened in Wuhan by redeeming what some of the onlookers of this tragedy have encountered. The author also alludes to the significance of mourning and applies it to the scenario of COVID-19 to refer to the eternal return of Nietzsche. Yu elaborates on Deleuze's adaptation of this postulation to explain the need of the repetition of mourning as many times as possible, but always returning in different representational manifestations, as it happened this time, via 'migrant workers in Wuhan, kids becoming orphans, or female medical workers with shaved heads' (Yu, 2020). Throughout Yu's article the Nietzschean concept 'the eternal return' entails the same repetition and it has the same origin of nourishing the sorrow during the transfigurative process (no matter how long it takes). Thus, the possibility of an erosion of the mourning process in a robust symbolic system like that of the Chinese, warrants a continuity of either secular or sacred respectability. This mourning process is required to happen, and is made possible by digital and later print media, even in extraordinary circumstances as the ones faced during COVID-19, which also foretold the world's future.

In Chinese culture, it is believed that after death the spirits still demand to be guided to preserve the fortune of the living relatives, and we add that Fang Fang's diary mitigates the disturbed eternal death rituals of mourning during the pandemic, which have essentially been digitalized, by transforming the rites of passage for those online into a necessary and alternative space that allows people to transpose between the immediate unbearable reality and the virtual comforting zone. As Michael Berry argues, the online diary and its message boards materialized as 'a virtual biosphere of vibrant social debate – a place for readers to converge, share [...] and often cry' (Berry in Fang, 2020: 308). It is the respect for the dead and importance of death rituals in China, and the fact that people were helpless to be with their loved ones as they departed to perform the necessary mourning and burial rituals, that is central to our analyses. The digitally mediated diary becomes an opportunity for constructing an alternative subjectivity of reintegration and reconciliatory care among the Chinese who have lost their beloved ones.

## Rites of Passages in Deadly Times

The unique losses associated with the study of human behaviour and rituals in borderline situations has been a vital exploration for both classical and contemporary anthropology. The inevitability of dramatic events that cause physical or emotional harm have been researched since their inception in

anthropology. Such studies have been focused on finding and analysing generic patterns underlying cultural differences (Hertz, 1907; Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; Van Gennep, 1960). Hertz (1907) asserts the importance since ancient times of the transition in the grip of grieving from life to death. Yet, in most societies funerary rites refer not only to the deceased but also to the mourner in the flow from one condition to another. Life is maintained alongside social events and symbolic interactions and, therefore, death is overcome. Indeed, Hertz has investigated traditional funeral rituals and the associated elementary forms were collective responses for preparing a person's soul into a journey that lies ahead after death.

Since their inception, societies have attempted to protect themselves with the production of life forces to honour passed ancestors as a collective representation that permeate the coming together of animate beings and mortality. In this way, for the bereaved the provisional burial becomes a site of symbolic rituals and organic events that enlivens an ancestral cultural memory. The disintegration of the materiality of body is subjected to forces of diverse order and nature that foster change by means of transforming rituals that can be articulated with the use of earth, water, cremation and fire. Traditional practices also include the regeneration of both the mourners and the dead, who are protected by the unconditional support of the accompanying community. Moreover, there is only one goal with this, for the mourner to carry on with their lives after the loss of someone (Hertz, 1907). Van Gennep (1960) has also explored and built on the ritual process and the different phases in mortuary rituals. Using the concept 'rites of passage', Van Gennep emphasizes a communal ritual or formality that marks certain types of change of place, social position or state. His interpretations of death help to understand, in collective ways, funeral practices in different societies by means of local rites. From the anthropological point of view, the rite constitutes an act, a repetitive ceremony whose objects and procedures may stimulate a hidden force or solemnity towards a determined action. Van Gennep considers the following rites of passage:

**Separation:** when an individual is permanently taken away from society. In other words, the dead itself.

**Liminality:** a transition that happens through religious forces that are basically repetitive practices to ensure that the person who has been separated from the community are neither a participant of the first stage, nor yet in a new state. Turner (1967) further contends that during the liminality stage social groups around rites can break in by means of symbolic interactions that can invite new possibilities within prescribed conventional norms.

**Incorporation:** when the individual or the collective are reintroduced into a new position that can have as much significance for the living as for the dead.

These rites of passage can be applied more generally to death rituals which are 'composed of sets of rites – pre-wake rites, wake, vigil, funeral, and mortuary rites' (Suzuki, 2002: 18).

There is socio-cultural research about the pandemic that uncovers how the digital requires additional theorization in the field of digital mourning much more substantially than is done now (Lowe, Rumbold, & Aoun, 2020; Lupton, 2021). With the arrival of social media, the representation of death through online memorial pages, and more concretely due to the development of digital imaging, this new ecosystem is transforming people's attitudes toward digital mourning. In contrast with physical memorials and institutionalized traditional burials, the use of digital images is turning into alternative vernacular forms of grieving, which are becoming mediators of the grieving process, at the same time as generating informal and personalized reactions about death and loss (Arnold, Gibbs, Kohn, Meese, & Nansen, 2017). We place the paper within this broader framework of digital mourning as a new phenomenon under researched within the context of COVID-19, acknowledging that more generally research on the technologies for grief and death-oriented online support rituals do exist (Sas, Schreiter, Büscher, Gamba, & Coman, 2019).

We further draw on [Van Gennep \(1960\)](#) framework of rites of passage, situating this within the context of digital mourning in modern China and Chinese people's life cycle rituals more generally. Our analyses pay particular attention to death, the (lack of) traditional/conventional rites, and alternative and collective narration in the digital *Wuhan Diary*. These rites of course differ across cultures, particularly in the liminal and incorporation phases, when referring to those who have been lost. Like the ritual experience outlined by Van Gennep and continued by [Turner \(1969\)](#) we also claim that the digital diary shares such a structure, suggesting some agential potentials that can reformulate a character or an individual over the interstices between the separation and incorporation phases in the making of new rites of passages. Due to the link between Turner's anthropology and the arts, we look at how this diary can become a preparatory stage that has organized and reorganized certain traditional rituals or sets of behaviour in a state of liminality, in other words, as transformative events, which are neither here nor there in the digital world ([Langdon, 1982](#)). What is interesting in Fang Fang's diary is to see how this literary device allows the reproduction of certain socio-cultural structures and non-structures. Some authors state that Van Gennep's three rites of passage can be applied in literature, considering liminality as an anti-structured space in which traditional literary genres or pockets of modern aesthetic can generate alternative forms of reflexivity such as those of the avant-garde ([Caws, 1981](#); [Spariosu, 1997](#)). To that extent, the liminal turns into an extended literary space between the imagined and the everyday life, in which literary readers and their social bonds outside can either transgress or return to the societies they split from. Liminality raises the question of subjectivity to discuss the individual/collective relationship, which has been internalized from the digital *Wuhan Diary* to suggest alternative symbolic rites of passage on digital platforms.

We analyse the Chinese state's handling of the deceased through Fang Fang's digital diary and the changes of attitude towards this regulation therein, which clearly points to the impossibility of mourning among families and friends in Wuhan because of the pressurized cremations, where the continuity of the social rhythm and rites is disrupted, (re)narrated and reconciled collectively. Our approach allows us to build on the understanding of the pandemic events, and how the digitalization of mourning engenders new subjectivities and enables new ritualistic practices in this digital era ([Nansen, Kohn, Arnold, van Ryn, & Gibbs, 2017](#)). As we will show, Fang Fang's narration, based on her direct experiences or accounts of other people's experiences, bears witness to the loss of local people and leads to reorganization of subjectivities within the germination of new digital rites of passage and mourning. This more broadly helps Chinese people to grieve in creative ways amid the uncertainty generated by the pandemic and lockdown. Through our reading of the diary, we find that there is a disruption between the collective imaginary to cultivate the mourning within the confines of traditional mortuary rites, and the individual's despair at coping with what the collective expects.

## **Building Subjectivities: Chinese Death Rites and a Semiotic-Ritual Method**

To better comprehend the rites of passage against the backdrop of *Wuhan Diary*, we explain here the methodology employed and the rationale. As demonstrated in the review of rites of passage, three symbolic instruments give meaning and allow the subject the transition between a before and an after. We attempt to map and contextualize this theoretical framework in the Chinese context to the unexpected deaths caused by the deadly coronavirus in Wuhan. We argue that such an indeterminate circumstance disrupts the three stages. This temporary conversion is the foundation on which the entire ritual process is (re)built.

Throughout Chinese history death rituals have been important to Chinese people, with ancient Confucian rituals seen dating back to the Chou dynasty (1027–221 BC). Cohen (1988) acknowledges that the passing on of the soul to the ancestors and its guidance has always been fostered by the state. Initially the sacrifices and the rituals offered to heaven and ancestors were believed to be of the utmost important bridges to conquer legitimacy and power to rule. Later, rituals were moulded around individuals and the concept of family and filial piety, as the basic kinship of worship, reputation, and psychological and economic assistance. Thus, the ancient ideal of social codes and behavioural decorum was extended to larger parts of society and led by private individuals. In this regard, the function of devotional manifestations was allegedly buttressing the development of harmony and social order within the nation (Lee, 2003).

As Fingarette (1972) acknowledges, Confucian rituals have humanized Chinese civilization, giving social dignity to the living participants reaching out the highest sense of morality, while retrieving civilizing synergies with their ancestors. These rites as social events were absorbed by the official Confucius elites, while Daoism and later Buddhist rituals expanded the heterogenization of the rites of passages from life to death by adding new death beliefs and practices (Cao & Chen, 2019).

Although the inheritance of traditions and prior rituals was deemed problematic when the new China was established in 1949, ‘the post-1978 economic reforms have contributed to the resurrection of the traditional measurement of family status by the expense of the funerals a family can support’ (Cheater, 1991: 8). Chinese people today lay emphasis in the idea of not losing face and rely on their own orthodoxy. In other words, Chinese people today are a group of ceremonial people who identify themselves with their ancestors, rendering the ancestors as a special veneration or a reflective guideline to follow (Sutton, 2007). On the other hand, there is also the obligation to perpetuate the family lineage, without ignoring the possibility of inheriting privileges, assets or titles as well as express grief at a personal level (Ahern, 1973).

Chinese people consider that death rituals begin before one’s departure. Just before the person is about to be taken from a living state, the closest relatives show their filial piety by visiting the terminal person, dressing them properly with dignity, and preparing them for their departure from this world. This *separation* stage defines the temporal dimension from the very first moment the person who has died is removed from society and transfigures into immortality. At the point of the body’s departure, the family gathers to mourn and cry. The first symbolic actions do not occur until the deceased moves into the liminal phase, which comes after the householder establishes an estimated date for the event. In the *liminal* stage, there is always a selection of the cultural norms, where the ritual transforms the signs into symbolic meanings – the oral expressions, the objects, colours, movements, spaces, clothes for the death and for the funeral, giving flowers, finding the right people to exercise the rituals and so on. The result is both the *incorporation* stage of the dead into the spiritual world and the ambiguous esoteric attributes that allow the guiding of physical sentiments and emotions of the living during the funeral (Feng & Du, 2016).

In Chinese culture, the coffin is usually placed inside the home before the burial, and incense, food and drinks are provided before it is closed with nails (Watson, 1982). During the farewell ceremony, the rites involved normally include several rounds of crying which also take other forms to conduct a joyful form of communication with the spirits. As part of a ‘happy funeral’ decorum, the spirits must enjoy the ceremony since they are still believed to be present and for that reason drinks and food offerings are presented. It is widely believed that such interconnection between the descendants and the souls of the ancestors will have an impact on the living and what happens to them later in their lives (Kipnis, 2017). Another emblematic symbol is the arrangement of the ancestral tablet. Time is meant to be permanent, and rituals of memorialization, like putting the last

stroke to the memorial table, turn into an imprint of the spirits as well as a physical testimony of the tomb as 'happy house'. *Shou ling* (to protect the soul), is a ritual by which Chinese people can show filial piety and loyalty to the deceased. People pray by burning incense to communicate to the spirits to be raised above the ground, sometimes with Daoist and Buddhist prayers and chants, allowing the soul to exist forever. This transmigration is based on the understanding of life, not of a linear but of a cyclical nature as in Buddhism, as the spirits together with the ancestors are invited to revisit during future festivals. In doing so, the rites enter in the reintegration phase, when the deceased has become an ancestor and their spirit is believed to be placed in three different sites: the ancestral tablet, the grave and the afterworld (Cohen 1988). These rites differ from place to place and are not always the same (Feng & Du, 2016).

The semiotic-ritual activity typical of Chinese society is subjected to an unusual mourning process of redefinition, because of the intervention of a more individual and nuclear sense of empathy that can be derived from the causes of a pandemic that has affected China. We regard *Wuhan Diary* as an intellectual exercise together with other media artefacts, which have a profound impact on activity semiotics that is generated in the grief of individuals and groups of people, who have directly suffered the death of someone close during the pandemic in China.

Far from taking the diary just as an anthropological media, where we can read and observe Fang Fang's commentaries online, it is also a social semiotic attempt to deconstruct the first-person observation of the author and her testimonies of the participants recorded therein. The diary is not only a supporting factual avenue but also a narrative and constructed text that has global impact (Zhang, 2021). In other words, one that is not journalistic in style, but a realistic one with tropes that seek for a messianic salvation in those 'hell on earth days' in Wuhan (Fumian, 2020). One could even argue that Fang Fang's diary has a broader transcendental possibility to connect people from other locales and cultures living under the pandemic spectre.

We argue that during the most unbearable lockdown days amid the pandemic, the diary harbours conflicting internal schemas about improving the checks and balances in which individuals swing between traditional and more modern digital ontologies of funeral rites. Sonesson (2011) who has problematized the passage of ritual from a symbolic perspective has proclaimed that subjects in the liminal zone can shift from a non-text to a text condition. Thus, in the textual horizon of a diary, one must be able to consider a particular type of discourse and narrative that has a private origin, which is ironically addressed by the same person who produces it. However, we also assume that there is an open agreement in the reading and an identity of the text that is generated among the writer, her testimonies of the participants and events, and the readers. Fang Fang's diary can be considered both biographical and literary, since the referential and symbolic text converges together: 'I am living in the field. The entire city of Wuhan is where this is happening. My neighbours, classmates, co-workers are all lockdown here in Wuhan. We all are. When they go online, they share their experiences, why shouldn't I be documenting all of that?' (Fang, 2020: 158). Therefore, we believe that the mediated social and cultural interactions within the online diary are fragmenting identities that echoed alternative digital subjectivities, as they emerge in the texts under analysis. Fang Fang as a modern online subject also forges her identity around an abstract reception that searches for the revival of a moral tradition (Bellah, 1985). Such reconfigurations of digital subjectivities are re-purposed through intertextuality and non-linear texts that become the interplay of personal emotions, literary allusions, social reactions and media reactions to this hyperlinked textual and virtual environment. The diary thus functions as a metaphor, in which Chinese digital mourners may build their subjectivities based on Fang Fang's inclusions or exclusions of their voices within this online textual residency (White & Le Cornu, 2011). These fragmented online selves configure a new

ecosystem of ways of writing and communicating that forge together the virtual rites of passage before, during and after the pandemic disaster in Wuhan.

The diary preserves those rites of passage in times, in which, the three stages have been disrupted and reconstructed, which raises questions about how the diary pervades mediated new rituals that would facilitate the mourners to express their grief (Sumiala, 2013). The rite acts throughout a biographical micro-structure, where the actors are the victims since they do not exude dominance over the rites of passage. Rites of passages are thus not overlooked in the diary. On the contrary, the text produces and re-produces the old rites, and develops new forms of mourning. The individuals who bear witness and cry out for being close to their deceased, might partly explain how these rites do not disappear, *even at a time where they are believed to disappear*. Thus, the diary is moulding a dialogue between individuals, something that is very unusual in a society where the sorrows of any rites of this nature are mediated by the collective. In what follows, we will map the three stages of rites of passage: separation, liminal and incorporation to unveil the online reconstruction of a collective representation of death in the earlier stage of the pandemic, without forgetting the individual voices encountered in the diary.

## Separation

The diary showcases how the act of mourning can be difficult because people's voices unfold narratives of disruption due to their frustrations for not having said goodbye to their loved ones. As part of their narratives, some online readers acknowledged how they have not seen the corpses and have been unable to have ritualized the farewell in person. The celebration of the mystery of death and life is missing since the moment of separation. The diary attempts to recover this and resume synchronically the rites as the death tolls were increasing day after day. Upfront in the diary, Fang Fang makes it clear that separation is a collective process, typical of a society like China's. As she writes, in the face of death 'the state is lending more and more support to the effort to fight this virus; there are more medical personnel rushing to Wuhan to join the efforts here' (Fang, 2020: 16). However, Fang Fang is also careful to acknowledge that there could have been more preventable measures to ensure people would not die without their family beside them. As she goes on to write 'empty talk about political correctness without seeking truth from facts also leads to disaster; now we are tasting the fruits of these disasters, one by one' (Fang, 2020: 18). Aside from the issue of what is politically correct, which is not the focus of our research, Fang Fang attempts to highlight that Wuhan's response to COVID-19 in the early stage, should have been more humanistic to prevent people from dying alone. As she writes, 'all we need is for the people assigned to enforce [...] principles to have just a little more humanistic spirit [...] just enough so that when an adult is forced into mandatory quarantine, their children don't end up starving to death alone at home' (Fang, 2020: 86). The author is referring here to news of a disabled teenager in Wuhan who died at home alone after relatives were quarantined. After various requests by the teenager's father to local villagers on Chinese social media platform WeChat, the child was only fed twice in 6 days, and the child's aunt also fell sick herself during his final 3 days (Standaert, 2020). In Chinese society, where biopolitical strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened the marginalization of death from the core of social life, the separation of bodies can be mediated through the digital comments about death in the public sphere. The reduction and privatization of death is replaced in the diary by an informal kind of cyber-memorial or virtual cemetery, before entering the liminal phase, where people can give support and seriously reflect upon what it is happening (Roberts & Vidal, 2000).

Likewise, in other instances throughout the diary, Fang Fang indicates how the pandemic is especially turbulent for China's older generation, who would otherwise not die alone in usual



circumstances. Using the example of Mr. Xiang, she argues that in normal circumstances elderly people would have received regular help from caregivers, ‘but since the outbreak occurred during the Chinese New Year, most of those workers all went back to their homes’ (Fang, 2020: 117). Evidently the author is crying out for people to collectively prevent unnecessary suffering and isolated death. Dying alone and being unable to say goodbye is central in the instances of separation that Fang Fang mentions in her diary, especially in the earlier stage of the deadly coronavirus.

‘Many families suddenly lost loved ones and they were not only unable to perform their filial duty of taking care of their relatives before they died, but they were even prohibited from paying their final respects; no matter what people do, this type of trauma will always leave behind a deep scar’ (Fang, 2020: 201).

There is an evident disruption here between the living and the spirits. The ceremonies can be held later, but many family members will suffer the consequences. It seems that even through her diary the inevitability of dying alone or individuals not being able to be with their loved ones before they die from COVID-19 before we even enter the liminal stage of rite is unescapable, or in her words ‘[T]he dark clouds of death continue to circle the sky above the city of Wuhan’ (Fang, 2020: 117). This perfectly allegorizes the spirits, which will continue to circle Wuhan until a proper farewell is offered. Considering that the rituals of separation are not possible due to COVID-19, the diary itself serves almost as a channel between the referential and symbolic, where in Fang Fang’s words, ‘literature is often a bright light that shines through one’s life, it is a wreath of straw you can cling to for support while floating down the river, it is that saviour you can turn to when you are reaching the end’ (Fang, 2020: 102). These words are important, because they symbolically inform us that Fang Fang’s text serves as virtual support for those victims who do not exude palpable control over the rites of passage because of the epidemic.

Fang Fang’s modern aesthetics and ethics transforms the development of the tragedy into an allegorical totality that must be fragmented, later attempting to renovate the grievance of death into a redeeming hope. The digital mourning in *Wuhan Diary* reimagines death itself in China, and goes against the modern logic of refuting it, making it visible in a symbolic and poetic way, which in turn is also affective. Death is hidden from the public eye, and it is expelled from hospitals and cemeteries. However, such death without a corpse is virtually exhibited, whilst it is also collectively shared and remembered. Indeed, the mere fact of shifting from one context of separation to another tends to repurpose the character of it to fit the new virtual environment (Christensen & Stine 2015).

## Liminal

Fang Fang’s subaltern voices can experience several transitions at the same time, in the midst of various losses that we are not aware of: the loss of a loved one, health confinement in a given space, lack of personal and medical means, being deprived of freedom, economic losses and a myriad of losses that can be experienced not precisely as minor events, since they add uncertainty to a path already marked by a suffering. In each virtual narration or account, then, the identification is neither of the individual nor of the communities, unless all subjective identification is misplaced in the episodic series of everyday official actions. The digital diary’s liminality is making any subjective impossible of being confined as an essentialist identity that will not account for diversity in the understanding of mourning in such circumstances. Perhaps one of the most prominent issues in the diary is the disruption between the collective imaginary to foster the mourning within the boundaries of mortuary rites, and the individual’s despair at managing collective expectations. As Fang Fang writes,

I was [...] wondering how they are going to manage all these funerals; right after that I followed up with a professional psychologist I know about this issue. I asked her: "I'm afraid that there is still one more big obstacle ahead for the people of Wuhan. Once the outbreak is over, there will be thousands of families that will need to hold funerals. How are we going to get through this? This will be another large-scale collective trauma that people will have to face." My psychologist friend responded: "Since all these people died at the hands of an infectious disease, the funeral homes immediately cremated all the bodies; but all the ashes will be preserved until after the outbreak. At that time, they will inform family members by telephone that they can come and pick up their relative's remains. At that time families can make arrangements for various memorial ceremonies (Fang, 2020: 200).

This is arguably one of the most moving parts of Fang Fang's diary, quoted here verbatim. It demonstrates how collective trauma transcends the family to reach the disturbance of the nation. Fang Fang evidently demonstrates the collective anguish among Chinese people because they cannot conduct proper funerals for their loved ones. The author demonstrates to us the importance of closure through the funeral ritual. After all, burial rituals are a collective process for the Chinese family, a time when the collective takes each other by the hand when they need support and guidance. COVID-19 therefore evidently altered funeral rituals, especially for those in Wuhan. Moreover, with strict social distancing measures and congregations halted, grieving families were left with the extra trauma of not being able to say a conventional farewell. Funeral formats therefore inevitably had to undergo change, as Fang (2020) writes, on the one hand 'arrangements will need to be made for thousands of deceased individuals, I suspect that the government will have to get involved to help with some of the logistics' (200); on the other hand she always shows her discontent on various occasions throughout the diary that the 'government would block information about what was happening [...] I figured that there was no way the government would censor news about something so important' (20). It is thus unclear at this moment what the long-term repercussions will be of the intertwining of the unidirectional control of the government in the real world and cyberspace in this type of digitalized liminal rites of passage.

For Fang Fang, the government must play an expected, if not a prominent, role to help with funeral arrangements like in other public affairs in a socialist country. China is no stranger to government involvement in funeral affairs, as the country tried to modernize its traditional burials when cremation gained grounds years ago (Kipnis, 2017). This gives play to a scientific and modern approach to common superstitious and religious ontologies about death,

[The government] promotes and often demands cremation, and it attempts to outlaw or discourage what it considers to be feudal practices [...] Throughout East Asia, urbanization and the resulting decrease in space for burials as well as decreases in the sizes of households and kinship networks, have resulted in increases in rates of cremation and less lavish funerals (Kipnis, 2017: 222).

The situation was even more eminent during the Wuhan lockdown. For Fang Fang, her testimonies are painful to read, as she remarks on 'those relatives who have been forced to watch their loved ones tied up in a body bag and shipped off to a crematorium' (Fang, 2020: 76). For Fang Fang, individual trauma is a collective issue that relates to the prevention of families from seeing their loved one's bodies, due to the risk of potential contagion. She similarly discusses the disruption COVID-19 has caused for the Qing Ming festival

Honoring and remembering our past relatives, burning incense for them, and sweeping their tombs are all traditions that have persisted a long time in our culture. This is also a rite that most families partake in every

year. For the people of Wuhan, who are usually stubbornly traditional, this year's festival will be a big challenge for people (Fang, 2020: 234).

*Qing Ming* (Tomb Sweeping) festival is one of China's four intangible cultural heritages. Evidently, for Fang Fang, the thought of disruption to a festival which is the most imperative and central ritual festival to venerate ancestors and sweep their tombs is both collectively distressing and unthinkable. As Fang Fang states, the impact of the loss of thousands of people in just the short space of a few months will be paramount, 'Their loved ones are gone, yet they are not only unable to prepare their tombs in remembrance; they cannot even pick up the ashes of their deceased relatives' (Fang, 2020: 234). This disruption may happen every year after, but it also pre-empts what aspects can be improved through voicing her concerns as a public figure and influential writer. Chinese people especially refuse to accept death as an end, instead it can be reincarnation or entering eternity. As such, for Fang Fang, the disruption of the liminal rite of passage is heart-breaking, as she writes that 'I'm quite concerned for families that have lost someone [...] they won't be able to handle this extended period of repression' (Fang, 2020: 234). With such statements, we could say Fang Fang is sharing and configuring ideas like what Sas et al. (2019) calls the 'leveraging *digital* craft for helping bereaved people process grief' (411, our emphasis). Fang Fang not only expresses herself, but through what Kohn, Gibbs, Arnold, and Nansen. (2016) calls the 'realisation of the duty of care' that is 'a matter of personal agency', she is able to maintain support for those grieving, crossing the border between online and offline, contributing to the reformulation of rites of passages.

Fang Fang's sadness at the disruption caused to China's traditional funeral rites is arguably also the reason that she holds the government accountable in her politicization of mourning, as she argues that they should 'express their gratitude to the families of those thousands of victims; their loved ones were the wrongful victims of a terrible scourge' (Fang, 2020: 202). She is angry that families could not have their last farewell with their group adherents or have a fitting funeral, instead pain and frustrations were bottled up. The memory of the Chinese to their ancestors is carried out to the last consequences in the country, where the *Qing Ming* Festival is endorsed politically and culturally (Willis, 2019).

Without forgetting all the risks that the dead bodies can be contagious, the emergency preparedness of their cremations have disrupted the liminal rites that are normally held in funerals. The liminal phase could also be compared with the term 'transmission belt,' as pointed out by Fumian (2020) when discussing Fang Fang's diary, in the sense that it aims to connect in a dialogical fashion, the government and its people, in matters of this catastrophic nature inside and outside the confines of the real and the virtual. This is the beginning of the integration phase.

## Integration

This stage is determined by the actions that the group develops to 'aggregate' self-respect to families and the diseased to restore the disturbed social order. On the one hand, we would say that in this stage, each deceased body also becomes digital, since its idealization can partly be controlled by the mourners and other diary's readers when raising their concerns. Then in such life-threatening settings, this virtual body becomes somehow only universally accessible through the cyberspace as a new trend brought about by both the coronavirus and the diary itself. It is interesting here to see a foreword on Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary by the text's translator Michael Berry. In his words, the diary leaves behind a digital footprint, where Fang Fang's interactions with those online become central to the narrative that she writes. Berry rightfully argues that the diary not only gives deep insights into the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan but also

“offers an equally rich dive into the complex world of the Chinese internet. As the quarantine drags on, Fang Fang finds her life increasingly intertwined into a virtual world of texts, online news clips, and social media posts [...] Fang Fang merges the first-hand perspective of someone going through the uncertainty, fear, and isolation of life under the shadow of a strange new virus [...] The result is a hybrid form that alternates between the quotidian and the epic, the mundane boredom of life under lockdown and the ever-expansive network of the World Wide Web” (Berry in Fang, 2020: 308).

A prime example is the death of Dr. Mei Zhongming, an assistant director of Dr. Li Wenliang’s (who is described in more detail later) department. Fang Fang recalls that ‘Once news broke of his death, all his former patients started posting condolences and remembrances online’ (Fang, 2020: 178). Chinese people here are, as such, left only with a process of grieving on the internet. In this way, however, the digital diary seems to never let the bodies completely die, since social media accumulates the digital footprints of a specific person after their death due to COVID-19 and accrues his or her evidence of an alternative digital identity, which, in any case, survives his or her physical death. Through this type of digital eyewitness prism, death and grieving is publicly socialized, and the dead body returns digitally to the world of the living and shares a space with them. In a way, it seems like immortality must be fabricated, and the immortal persists in the new virtual reality and in its vastness, where the new constructed body is always ready to be resurrected (Bauman, 2014).

On the other hand, the Chinese government has also replaced the traditional reception of the dead with a sequence of ‘modified’ ceremonial acts under such extraordinary circumstances. An intervention by the state in the final departures has been required, with a strict protocol established to cremate dead bodies in designated crematoriums while conventional funerals were disrupted. The role of the Chinese government has been intended to coagulate its moral authority, which goes beyond the rational principles that put together the individual and the state (Durkheim, 2008: 69). Healthcare staff who were at the frontline and dealt with the avalanche of suspected and confirmed cases have also embodied a post-socialist collective spirit, which was intended to avoid leaving anyone behind: ‘All told, there were more than 40,000 medical workers who came in to help, and not a single one of them was infected; it is truly a miracle! Thanks to them, all of us can now breathe a collective sigh of relief’ (Fang, 2020: 257).

As in many western countries, the official coverage of mass media has left out the suffering of the victims and has not combined it into the integration phase as a form of grieving. Sontag (2003) argues how the images in news of human pain could turn western citizens into mere spectators of a vulgar spectacle, without understanding what is really going on in those visual representations. Such sensational journalism leaves ‘no space’ for ethical sensibility when the press is occupied by ‘politics and moralism’ (Sontag, 1977: 177). What we see today from the polarizing and adversarial media representations does no good in healing or in reconciliation (James & Valluvan, 2020; Zhang, 2021). The spaces left over by mass media for such ‘sensibility’ in the digital mourning process as Fang Fang’s diary insinuates, were visible in the responses demonstrated in Chinese social media:

Today I saw a video posted in my friend’s chat group; the video was just shot as the medical aid teams were departing; as they left, all the Wuhan residents who still cannot leave their own homes stood on their balconies calling out. Thank you! We know it’s been hard! Farewell! Seeing that that was enough to leave you in tears. Wuhan people from all kinds of life stood together to give these angels in white their most heartfelt salute; after all these were the people who saved our city – the people who saved us (Fang, 2020: 258).

Chinese people and their collective sense of humanism have been praising the real heroes of the pandemic with their highest gratitude: the doctors, nurses and the rest of the staff and volunteers. At the same time, they have also been embraced by the state as epic heroes for the country, whose prodigious endeavours have buttressed a sense of integration between what it is officially visible and unofficially invisible. It is then interesting how Fang Fang mentions the use of social media as a form to reunite and reconfigure people, again expressing a humanistic spirit as opposed to a ritual or religious one. She writes,

‘we should really establish a website that can function as a “wailing wall”; perhaps we can call it the “wailing web” [...] That would provide a place for mourning families to go where they could post photos, light candles and have a good cry [...] We need to release the sadness in our hearts and we need to express our grief over all the loss we have witnessed. Perhaps the website could also feature some comforting music, which might make it even better’ (Fang, 2020: 235).

According to Fang Fang, the disintegration with the local government during the pandemic crisis occurred in the moment where the official attitude towards Li Wenliang swayed. Doctor Li, who tried to alert the outbreak in the early stages and whose death caused outrage and heartbreak among many Chinese people online, enters the scene: ‘The tears people shed for him are like an unstoppable wave inundating the internet. Tonight Li Wenliang will sail away to another world on a wave of tears’ (Fang, 2020: 56); ‘His Weibo webpage has become a wailing wall where countless people can go to forever remember him’ (Fang, 2020: 267). Like an active cemetery, the diary becomes a virtual third space that allows a digital memorial, which is quite the opposite to the traditional sociability of old rituals. In other words, those traditional conventions, which were protected by the family, the State, religion, or even fostered by the diverse ideologies and barriers of all kinds. The virtual diary and its wall feature a social interaction that includes voluntary, free, and cooperative relationships that emerge in the heat of shared interests related with the unfortunate moment of death, under the new logic of network cooperation in the digital age (Castells, 1996).

Fang Fang seems to claim in the diary that the integration phase has been de-politicized with the sole prerequisite to sustain the emotional griefs of people involved in this dramatic incident. This online wall represents a more emotional reintegration with the sole purpose to crystalize a real collective grieving process, collective beyond a single person. Here social media becomes what Sas et al. (2019) terms ‘technologies for grief’, which are designed to comfort bereaved people. Fang Fang’s digital diary attempts to foster a more psychological comfort, and advocates for less political commemorations, for a nation that needs mutual support groups for all its spaces. She explains later, ‘to be honest our commemorations are in some sense our way for us to commemorate ourselves, to commemorate this experience we went through, and there was one important man who was part of that experience - his name was Li Wenliang’ (Fang, 2020: 328). Li Wenliang’s death distresses the competing discourses and narratives of national and local duels during the early outbreak of the pandemic as well as the social media flames charged with ‘toxic angry nationalism’ against any potential disparagement with the management of the virus (Ying, 2012). It also legitimizes the unofficial virtual mourning that can amass alternate lamentations through wailing walls, understood as public spheres of dialogue. Once more, Chinese society is asking their bureaucrats to display their humanistic face and give dignity to the sufferers of the virus. Not only with well-deserved tributes in the public eye, but also with the possibility of digging deep into the truth to not commit the same mistakes again in future. Product of the pragmatic and discursive ambivalence about the ‘official’ spaces of both disruption and recuperation, there is no doubt that the losses and their deferred mortuary rites give rise to a slippery symbolic ‘visibility’ in the diary. One that personifies both

imposing and controlling shadows as well as one that shows hopes over the postponed funeral facilities that approves collectivization and mourning according to a virtual reality at hand to be effective within the society in a state of emergency. Finally, in the words of Michael Berry, ‘Whereas we often think of diaries as an especially private literary form – a place where you record your innermost fears and desires, often alongside a more mundane record of events from everyday life – *Wuhan Diary* was a public platform from the very beginning: a virtual open book (in Fang, 2020: 218).

## Conclusion

Fang Fang’s digital diary has showcased how the death rites of passage can be eternalized beyond their physical limits in the cyberspace. In other words, as a social and cultural ritual of passage, this ritual runs through a wide field of relationships crystallized throughout the stretched online community described in the diary whose symbolic interactions give alternative meanings to the processes of mourning in times of public health crisis. It explores the reconfiguration linked to governmental, medical, collective and individual experiences encountered and reconstructed in the diary. Historically, funeral rites have been arranged to the extent that the Chinese communities grant their mourning acts and social categories in funeral events oriented by an expectation of family and/or nation commitment. The grieving process online can be apprehended as a successive construction and reconstruction of meanings by individuals upon an alternative identitarian collective order, which has been imposed to build reliable patterns that allow online readers to relate to the world around them together with their own inner world. These unfortunate and unexpected mourning events suddenly have been situated in a ‘digitalized transition’, that endures after the physical death. Therefore, such collectivistic forms of subjectivity implore that everyone’s digital narrative in the diary can be understood as a digital trace, in which not only the mourners but also the digital world scattered throughout a big techno-politically controlled cyberspace can participate in one’s passing from one way of being to another – understood as both collective and anonymous personal grief.

Van Gennep’s model contributes to reinscribe those rites of passage only through its re-signification in an extreme public health emergency. We have discussed that the three phases are permeated in the virtual diary through separation, liminal and integration. These episodes instigate a compendium of new and reinscribed understandings of Chinese funeral rituals in the digital world today without one imposing their codes at each stage of the passage. At the integration stage, for instance, we see that the state executes its strength and influences in the grieving dynamics that never cease of being collective. In a way, funeral rites and their significance have always been fluctuating in Chinese history between family and state structures. This time, the integration phase has been handled by the national and local authorities, who have exercised control over the corpses, which has been medically supported and socially accepted, although it has been hurtful. Nevertheless, the virtual diary comprises textual and symbolic rites of passage that cries out for online Chinese subjectivities to be more inclusive and transparent, if the integration aims to be truly collective as a social ceremony or even a form of individual’s redemption through ritual and psychological as well as virtual provision of mourning in these times of unprecedented national and global disruption.

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