

NAVIGATING THE INTERNET PUBLIC IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY OF FANG
FANG'S WUHAN DIARY

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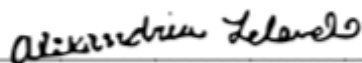
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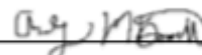
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Alexandria Leland. Navigating The Internet Public in China: A Case Study of Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary

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This thesis examines how netizens, while faced with the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, practiced online civic engagement. The work stems from a desire to understand the online civic engagement strategies available in contemporary China during times of uncertainty. Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary serves as my case study. A year after the start of the pandemic, scholarly articles are being published that too shed light on the role of social media during the pandemic (Chen 2020). This thesis is unique in that it provides an in-depth textual analysis of Fang Fang's writing style, strategies and content. Similarly, it investigates the response of her readership. This thesis contributes to our understanding of Chinese Internet literature, collectivism, historical civic engagement, and *guanxi*. In Chapter 1, my analysis of Fang Fang's methods for establishing authority, such as emphasizing her location and calling upon her Wuhan networks, finds that personal connections contribute to the authority essential to building trust within the Internet public sphere. In Chapter 2, my analysis reveals how, through asking questions and using confidential sources, Fang Fang encourages collective action from her readers. In Chapter 3, I argue that *guanxi* exists in the Internet public sphere and that because of its characteristics, *guanxi* should still be considered an appropriate lens for analyzing online civic engagement practices. Overall, my analysis finds that writing techniques aimed at creating seemingly personal relationships may establish the authority and resemblance of *guanxi* characteristics, which can form trusting online relationships

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Introduction

In the year 2020, the coronavirus pandemic shook the world. Without regard for socioeconomic status, gender, race, and nationality, the SARS-CoV-2 Virus spread. The stability of society shattered and many global citizens, at some point in 2020, asked similar questions. To name a few: How do we communicate when told to stay home? Whom should we listen to about updates on the Virus? How do we choose which experts to trust? Can we participate in civic engagement during such a time? Citizens living in Wuhan, the epicenter of the Virus, are the first global citizens to wrestle with these questions. Fang Fang, a 76-year-old Wuhan native and published author is among them.

From January 25th to March 24th Fang Fang posted daily online blog entries, that provided, in real-time, a glimpse of Wuhan citizens working through these questions. In total, Fang Fang writes 60 entries that were eventually translated into English and published as an almost 400 page book (Fang 2020). Fang Fang's first entry was uploaded only 2 days after Wuhan was put under lockdown restrictions. This first entry was rather short, only about a page long. In this initial entry Fang Fang claimed she is posting as “a way for people to understand what is really going on here on the ground in Wuhan” (Fang 4, 2020). Many of Fang Fang's entries did indeed describe life in Wuhan lockdown. Additionally, Fang Fang used her platform, as she describes in her final March 24th entry, to “express her views” (Fang 2020, 352). Fang Fang's entries grew in length, with many of her March entries being over 3 pages long. Furthermore, Fang Fang's entries changed in tone as she defended her comments. The reason for this tone shift may be because her readers learned that her blog posts would be translated and published in book form abroad. This decision to publish abroad was controversial among her readers. Despite

many readers calling for her to cease writing, Fang Fang wrote a total of 60 daily entries that, when considered together, provide insights into this transformative period in Wuhan.

Through textual analysis of the English version of Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary*, I identify civic engagement practices available to the Internet public in China. In doing so, I determine Fang Fang's most common civic engagement practice to be her call for collective action. By examining the common tropes of *Wuhan Diary*, I note Fang Fang's writing methods and bring forth their possible purpose(s). As a result, I conclude forming trusting relationships to be a critical goal of her writing strategies when calling for collective action. Furthermore, I identify two themes as central to forming trust: authority and *guanxi*. In China, *guanxi* is a word for describing strong relationships built upon personal trust, obligation and often involves an exchange of favors. The personal nature of *guanxi* relationships leads many scholars to believe that *guanxi* cannot exist within the impersonal Internet public. Yet, my investigation leads to the revelation that forms of personal address and relationships that resemble *guanxi* relationships can exist within the Internet public. In addition, I analyze comments left on Fang Fang's Weibo posts, Weibo posts related to the discussion of Fang Fang's diary, web news articles, and forum entries. My analysis of these readers' comments gives insights into the role of trust, authority, and relationships in the Internet public. More specifically, my analysis of the readers' perspective reveals that perceived identity contributes to the establishment of authority and the development of relationships in the Internet public. The comments are largely preserved on China Digital Times or saved by English and Chinese journalists. Comments preserved on sites like these are helpful since original comments and post

may no longer exist online. A possible reason for the removal of these comments and posts is China's censorship practices.

Overall, my analysis finds that writing techniques aimed at creating seemingly personal relationships may establish the authority and resemblance of *guanxi* characteristics, which can form trusting online relationships. In addition to establishing trust, when calling for collective action within the Internet public, I identify three writing methods: emphasizing collective belonging, asking questions, and using confidential sources. However, these writing methods do not guarantee the formation of a trusting relationships nor the rise of collective action. While this thesis itself does not attempt to determine whether this trust is established, detailed consideration of Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* leads to my argument that *guanxi*, despite its limitation, should still be used as a lens to examine online civic engagement practices. Using *guanxi* to examine online civic engagement practices allows for an acknowledgement of the role of personal trust and obligation, both of which play a role in the civic engagement practice of calling for collective action.

In this introduction, I contextualize the concepts essential to understanding the practices of civic engagement within the Internet public sphere in China. Furthermore, I aim to situate our case study, Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* entries, within the developing Internet public. I focus on defining 'netizens' as these are the Chinese citizens whom Fang Fang calls upon to practice civic engagement. Next, I outline the history and characteristics of Internet literature because Fang Fang's *Diary* is an example of this type of writing. To further situate the Internet public in China, as well as Fang Fang's *Diary* content, I describe the collective. Finally, I introduce the concept of *guanxi* since I use it

as the lens through which I examine the relationships that compose the Internet public. By providing these definitions and concepts I set up the foundation to begin the analysis of the following three chapters.

The Internet Public in China

Fang Fang initially posted her entries on Weibo, a Chinese blog posting site. Her entries quickly gained attention and by April her entries had 380 million views (Davidson 2020). In regards to her large following, Fang Fang remarks that she “never imagined that tens of millions of readers would be staying up late each night just waiting to read [her] next installment” (Fang 2020, vii). Furthermore, Chinese citizens initially seemed to react positively to her entries. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Fang Fang’s entries were “at first embraced as an honest depiction of peoples suffering, [the entries] became a target of nationalist anger once it was published in English” (Su 2020). Many of Fang Fang’s first entries express appreciation for her readers’ support. Even China News Service, the state media, praised her writing (Tsoi 2021). However, with the announcement of her abroad publication there was a shift in the domestic reception of her entries as well as perception of Fang Fang’s identity. Many readers were upset about Fang Fang’s entries being published abroad. They seemed concerned that Fang Fang’s comments may negatively reflect China. (Xia 2020). For example, Meng Xia from The Conversation reported that “one post about her on Weibo said: “You’re giving Western countries ammunition to target China” (Xia 2020). Another post on Weibo said “Wuhan Diary is a knife handed over to foreigners and a bullet shooting at Chinese,” (Davidson 2020). Overall, many Chinese netizens expressed that the publication of her works abroad provided Americans with the means to criticize China. Furthermore, some readers

began to claim that Fang Fang was working for foreign agencies to spy on China (Tsoi 2021). Some readers wrote that Fang Fang was a traitor to China (Tsoi 2021). In general, the announcement of her abroad book publication changed many readers' perspective of Fang Fang's identity. Yet, Fang Fang did not shy away from addressing those who criticized her and her intentions. She stood up for herself and defended her choice to speak what she saw as the truth.

Her readers, composed of the supporters, haters, and skeptics, contribute to Fang Fang's personal Internet public sphere. Fang Fang calls for her readers to be engaged netizens. She situates her call to action in the context of the pandemic. She passionately urges her readers to hold government officials accountable for their actions and models this behavior herself by calling out individuals whom she believes to be corrupt. She often refers to the days before lockdown to when many bureaucratic officials from Hubei and Wuhan attempted to "cover up the truth" (Fang 34, 2020). Not only does she take issue with the way government officials handled communications with the people of Wuhan; she also often disagrees with the way the state media portrays the pandemic. For example, about a month into lockdown, Fang Fang describes videos released by the state media that show people singing songs that praise the Communist Party and taking photos outside hospitals while holding the Chinese flag (Fang 2020, 82). She sees these patriotic acts as a form of intimidation and writes, "shouting political slogans is not going to ease the pain that the people of Wuhan are going through" (Fang 2020, 82). In response to this dominant media coverage, Fang Fang's entries provide her own instructions for responding to the coronavirus. She calls for people to come together, in community, to question and hold officials accountable.

Understanding Fang Fang's conceptualization of her public lays the foundation on which we can build our understanding for Fang Fang's communication methods as she calls for action. As introduced, Fang Fang calls for her readers to be engaged netizens. The term 'netizen' gained popularity throughout the 1990s as the Internet became more commonplace (Schiavenza 2013). In the English language, combining the words 'citizens' and 'internet' forms the term 'netizen'. Similarly, the Chinese words "wǎng shàng" (being online) and "mín" (an indication of a group of people) forms the word "wǎngmín" (netizen). However, examining the etymology of the term netizens may lead to an incorrect understanding. Netizens in China, and by extension this paper, are not to be understood as Internet users. Instead, the term netizen will refer to a much smaller subset of people. In this paper, netizens are those Internet users who actively engage, on the Internet, in political discourse.

In this thesis, I will investigate these netizens in order to gain an understanding of how Chinese citizens can engage in online political discussions. However, many scholars argue that using this viewpoint of netizens is inaccurate or, at the very least, has limitations. Journalist Matt Schiavenza prefers that we abandon the term all together. He sees the fact that the word netizen has come to be defined as an Internet user who engages in political discourse, rather than simply as an Internet user who engages online, as a negative. That is, he sees netizens as including those people who use the Internet in a social way as well as those who use the Internet for a political purpose. Thus, he feels that the term netizen is synonymous with the word people and as such sees netizens as an antiquated word choice. However, I argue that when the term netizen is clearly defined,

as I have, that it becomes a very helpful way of investigating this specific public and their actions. Schiavenza writes that a problem with the term netizen is that

it implies that political views in China exist solely online, away from the confines of regular society. But political speech exists offline in China, too, and not everyone with an opinion has the desire (or ability) to voice it in a microblog (Schiavenza 2013)

Of course, Schiavenza is correct that political speech also exists offline in China.

However, the fact that this distinction does exist (the fact that this sub-category created specifically for internet users engaging in political discourse is recognized) leads to a necessary investigation of this very group. Furthermore, Schiavenza's point raises interesting questions such as: Why is it that not everyone has the desire or ability to voice political concerns on microblogs? In what ways do the strategies of those people who engage in political discourse in person (outside the internet public sphere) differ from the strategies of those people who engage in political discourse in the internet public sphere? We can begin to answer such questions by investigating those case studies in which a person clearly be considered a netizen.

This thesis investigates Weibo netizens. Many users visit Weibo for entertainment alone. At the same time, Weibo has grown to serve purposes beyond entertainment. Of interest to this thesis is the use of Weibo for civic engagement purposes. Xinyue Chang argues that in modern times Weibo can be viewed as a somewhat successful "anti-corruption tool" used to "expose ongoing government corruption" (Chang 2013). For example, in 2011 Chinese netizens called out a government official for wearing expensive watches. The netizens believed he should be unable to afford the watches on his government salary. The netizens proclamations resulted in the firing of the

government official (Chang 2013). In addition to considering Weibo as tool to call out corruption, we may be able to consider Weibo as a source of “unofficial communication” (Liu 2013, 223). As Liu Jun explains, unofficial communication arises as necessity in China because “the official channels of communication in contemporary China fail to provide enough, and more importantly, credible information” (Liu 2013, 223). Fang Fang’s entries often points out that the State is covering up the truth. She then provides a different version, what she deems to be the true version, of information. My analysis of how Fang Fang approaches her instructions for netizens gives insight into the relationship between Weibo as a site for entertainment and as a tool for social change.

This relationship between entertainment and social change raises concerns for our definition of netizen. Where do we draw the line between content that can be classified as entertainment vs content that can be classified as political? Can such a line be drawn at all? Or, do the two groups overlap?

A clarification should be made. In this thesis, I define a netizen as someone who is actively engaging in political discourse. A netizen, for the sake of this thesis, is only a netizen when engaging with politics. In other words, the individual netizen is really just an Internet user engaging in political discussion in the moment. Furthermore, the bar for this engagement is very low. Indeed, in this thesis, even the simple act of reading political stories is defined as behaving like a netizen. While this thesis discusses netizens as a group of people making up a specific part of the Internet public, it may be helpful to think of a netizen as not so much an identity but rather as an action.

Like all Chinese sites, Weibo is subject to censorship. As result of this censorship, netizens may turn to alternative communication applications to continue to share their

posts. From the beginning Fang Fang acknowledges the censor's presence: her first entry ends "let's see if this post is able to be uploaded" (Fang 2020, 4). By mid February many of Fang Fang's post are immediately taken down upon being uploaded to Weibo. She resorts to posting on her WeChat. WeChat is a popular instant messaging app in China that also allows for the creation of groups. Later, friends of Fang Fang post her entries to their own WeChats in the hopes of spreading her entries.

Margaret Robert's research has helped establish how, and for what means, China's censorship functions. Foreigners often think that censorship in China is to stop criticism of the state but this thinking is only true to a certain extent (Roberts 2018). In reality, the government needs to know about the criticisms of the people. The cost of not knowing is huge (Roberts 2018). Thus, social media may be able to illuminate citizens' criticisms. Social media can give the "citizens a voice and a way to make an impact" as well as act "as an early warning system for party leaders" (Tufekci 2020). In reality, the purpose of censorship is to stop collective action (Roberts 2018). Collective action, as mentioned, is a common civic engagement practice of Fang Fang. Furthermore, Gary King's research has found that criticism of the censors often resulted in censorship (Roberts 2018). Criticism of the censors is a topic that Fang Fang does not shy away from. Understanding these two goals of China's censors are essential to understanding the necessity for Fang Fang's writing methods as she navigates the Internet public sphere.

Internet Literature in China

Fang Fang's Wuhan diary entries are building upon the work of predecessors. More specifically, we can call Wuhan diary entries a piece of Internet literature. Michael Hockx provides a helpful historical overview of how this genre came into being. He also

attempts to explore how the public within this genre operates (Hockx 2015). Using Hockx's definition of Internet literature in China, I outline the extent to which this definition defines Fang Fang's work. Furthermore, I articulate how the evolution of Internet literature in China led to Fang Fang's work today. Using an example, I establish how Fang Fang modifies the works of her predecessors to create her own take on Internet literature.

Internet literature in China, as defined by Hockx, "is Chinese-language writing, either in established literary genres or in innovative literary forms, written especially for publication in an interactive online context and meant to be read on-screen" (Hockx 2015, 4). At first glance, Fang Fang's entries seemingly fit the definition of Internet literature in China. Fang Fang wrote her entries in Chinese and wrote, in the beginning, exclusively for online publication. In the following section, I examine the typical characteristics of Internet literature in China to understand the extent to which Fang Fang's work incorporates the characteristics Internet literature. As a result, I conclude that Fang Fang uses the personal writing form, characteristic of Internet literature and emphasized by the diary structure, to navigate censorship and form personal relationships within the Internet public.

Works considered Internet literature are often published online in pieces over time. Fang Fang's work, with her daily entries, follows this pattern. Yet, the earliest authors of works considered Internet literature did not write their works in real-time. Instead, authors usually wrote, or at the very least planned, their literature before online publication. In comparison, Fang Fang wrote her pieces in real-time with the evolving public health crisis.

The diary format is a more recent writing strategy within Internet literature. Today, the growing popularity in blog posting sites contributes to the growth in this style of writing. Hockx explains,

the diary-like nature of many applications favored by online writers (discussion forums, blogs, microblogs) has made the online chronicle a dominant genre, and other types of experimentation with this type of writing are also worth investigating.

(Hockx 2015, 84)

Weibo is an example of one of the applications as described by Hockx. Here, Hockx is calling for more research to be done on pieces that utilize a diary format. Fang Fang's blog entries are written in diary form. As she chronicles the outbreak of the coronavirus, she uses writing practices that aim to form seemingly personal relationships to call for collective action. This thesis contributes to the investigation requested by Hockx.

Fang Fang is not the first person to gain Internet fame because of his/her online diary. In fact, in 2000, Lu Youqing published online Diary entries that became very popular. His entries followed his battle with cancer and only stopped when he died a few months after his first entry. Like Fang Fang, Lu was "active well before the rise in popularity of online blogs" (Hockx 2015, 57). That is, Lu and Fang Fang both published in print before engaging with the Internet public.

In many ways, Lu's diary entries paved the way for Fang Fang's style of diary entries. I will compare Lu's Diary and Fang Fang's Diary to situate Fang Fang's Diary within this realm of Internet literature. In doing so, I bring forth themes found throughout this thesis. More specifically, I discuss writer-reader interactions and the tendency for the writer to comment on the condition of Chinese citizens.

Lu's interactions with his readers are moderately comparable to Fang Fang's interaction with her readers. While his interactions with his readers are limited (apparently he was in pain), in his entries he expresses "his gratitude and affection for those readers, some including old friends, and classmates he had not heard from for a long time"(Hockx 2015, 48). To sum up Lu's interactions with his readers, Hockx writes, "in any case, it is clear that the development of the content of this online work was driven at least in part by direct reader response" (Hockx 2015, 49). This sentence of Hockx could easily be describing Fang Fang's own interactions. As Fang Fang posts more entries, she devotes more and more attention to the response of her readers. She addresses their concerns and questions and, like Lu, the content of her work shifts.

Lu and Fang Fang both comment on the state of China and its people. According to Hockx, this practice is a "common trope in modern Chinese writing", yet Lu is one of the first to bring forth this trope in a private chronicle (Hockx 2015, 51). Both Lu and Fang Fang comment on China by utilizing similar writing techniques. They both use their own personal experiences to make comments about the condition of China. For example, Lu uses a discussion of his own siblings to bring up the one-child policy. Following this discussion "he goes on to develop this point into a critique of Chinese people in general" (Hockx 2015, 51). In addition, both Lu and Fang Fang comment on China by posing questions to their readers. For example, Lu writes "is it really that hard for Chinese people to be happy?". This sentence seems like it could have been copied out of Fang Fang's *Diary*! In conclusion, Fang Fang and Lu use a diary format, as well as the similar writing practices of providing personal experiences and asking questions to comment on the state of the Chinese citizens.

I explained how Fang Fang and Lu share two similar practices: their writer-reader interactions and tendency to comment on the condition of the Chinese citizen. In the coming chapters I will provide many examples that support the claims I made regarding Fang Fang's work. I provide this short introduction to specific themes found in Internet literature in an effort to situate the case study of Fang Fang's diary. Writers following Lu used the same kind of writing that "Lu practiced but at the same time added to its variety by distinguishing [their] own work from that of [their] predecessor" (Hockx 2015, 57). We too can consider Fang Fang's diary as building upon previous works. That is, Fang Fang's writing strategies for navigating the Internet public sphere are not entirely her own. Furthermore, we should recognize that modified versions of Fang Fang strategies may also be used by netizens navigating the Internet public

Hockx argues Lu "created a new genre" (Hockx 2015, 55). By comparing their works to the genre of traditional Chinese literature, I will illustrate how Lu's diary and Fang Fang's diary can be considered an example of a "new genre". I will explain how this "new genre" is a modification of traditional Chinese literature (Hockx 2015, 55).

Hockx describes Lu's literary genre as one that "is private writing for public consumption" (Hockx 2015, 49). Both Fang Fang and Lu utilize this characteristic of a published diary. Using the Internet to practice this style of writing provides evidence for Hockx's claim that Lu created a new genre. However, Lu's writing also builds upon traditional Chinese literature practices. To elaborate, Hockx writes that Lu's writing includes aspects of very traditional Chinese view of literature because his entries practice

the idea that the reader is a kind of soul mate or friend and, conversely, that there is a need to provide readers with personal information about the author so that author and work can be better understood. (Hockx 2015, 49)

In other words, traditional Chinese literature uses writing techniques that imply the reader and author are friends. Like Lu, Fang Fang tries to create, with her readers, a relationship that can be classified as a friendship. This type of relationship between the writer and reader is vital to understanding the Chapter titled *Guanxi in the Fang Fang-Netizen Relationship*. Both Lu and Fang Fang emphasize this relationship, specific to traditional Chinese literature, by posting public diary entries on the Internet. These diary entries seem personal and contribute to the “new genre” as described by Hockx.

Internet literature allows for writers to make comments about the political by writing in the personal form. However, Fang Fang’s post do not seem political. But, as she calls for netizens to join together and unearth injustices, her message is certainly one related to politics and power. Guobin Yang argues that lockdown diaries, such as Fang Fang’s, can be considered “works of endurance art” (Yang 2021). As defined by Yang, endurance art engages “with meaning that reach far beyond their original experience and context” (Yang 2021). The diary format allows Fang Fang to claim that she is not calling for political action, but rather that she is only reciting her own personal narrative. Fang Fang uses the personal writing form, characteristic of Internet literature and emphasized by the diary structure, to navigate the Internet public. That is, despite Fang Fang calling for citizens to collectively act, a common type of statement blocked by the censors, her writing practices allows her to better claim that she is neither breaking the rules of the censor nor of the state. As a result, when Fang Fang’s post do become censored, her

frustration is given legitimacy. Furthermore, the personal writer-reader relationship, characteristic of Internet literature, allows her to grow the trust with her audience. As a result, Fang Fang's readers may be more willing to come together in action.

The Silent Collective

A theme of Fang Fang's entries is a concern that people are not revealing corruption. Fang Fang weaves a narrative in which people passively accept wrongdoings. For example, on February 29th, Fang Fang criticized people, who collectively, failed to act. After a lengthy quotation from a doctor discussing the initial spread of the coronavirus, Fang Fang voices her opinion that the "whip of collective silence struck down all of us" (Fang 2020, 163). Her opinion echoes another doctor's opinion from just a page prior who states "the silence of the collective is always the most terrifying thing" (Fang 2020, 162). I assert that Fang Fang believes that there is portion of the Chinese general public that are recognizing corruption, but failing to do anything about it. Thus, in summarizing Fang Fang's own words, we will call this group of people the "Silent Collective".

Throughout Fang Fang's entries Fang Fang provides instructions, either directly or indirectly, to her readers. She encourages them to, instead of being silent, reveal wrongdoings to the public. Fang Fang encourages her readers to transform, as a group, from a Silent Collective to a collective of engaged netizens willing to call out corruption.

Fang Fang is not the first person to call for such a transition. In the coming pages, I provide a definition and background for the Collective. Furthermore, I provide the necessary contextualization of the relationship and communication practices between the Collective and the Chinese State.

In his address to the 19th Congress, President Xi Jinping discussed his goals for propelling China into a "new era" (Xi 2017). During the address, Xi discussed that the masses in China can be defined as practicing “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Xi 2017). This means, as President Xi elaborated, that the “the Chinese Communist Party should take a people-centric approach for the public interest” (Xi 2017). In President Xi’s eyes, the idea is that the welfare of the people is the priority of the Party. Furthermore, President Xi emphasized that this care is for *all* the people in China (italics for emphasis). Since Xi Jinping has asserted that the state exists for all people, I will consider the ‘Collective’ of the ‘Silent Collective’ to encompass all Chinese people.

I should mention that the idea of a Collective predates President’s Xi’s address to congress. Indeed, Xi even contributed the idea to China’s previous leader Deng Xiaoping. This being said, this thesis is seeking to understand how China’s current day Collective operates. As such I provide Xi’s address to Congress as a way in which we can see the idea of the Collective being worked out in China’s modern political sphere.

We can study the Silent Collective by examining those avenues through which the Collective has the ability to speak. This thesis investigates the Internet as an avenue for expressing collective opinions. Yet, historically there are other avenues through which the collective can express their concerns. One such important way is through petitioning. Petitioning is important in Chinese culture and can be grounded in history. Qin Shao, a professor of history, has extensively researched the history of expressing grievances in China. A historical lens provides context for Fang Fang’s desire to speak out about experienced or observed misconduct.

The need for people to express misconduct is not a new concept. Indeed, Shao states that “the idea that aggrieved people suffering from official wrongdoing can bring their complaints to higher authorities can be traced to ancient times” (Shao 2013, 19). With the establishment of The Peoples Republic of China in 1949, petitioning bureaus became the official mean through which people could express their grievances. The petitioning bureaus are suppose to serve as a funnel through which a complaint can reach the necessary department, person, location, etc. These petitioning bureaus are run by the local government and continue to exist to this day.

The Chinese State considers petitioning bureaus to be a means through which the individual can try to be heard. Yet, petitioning does not have to be a solo activity. In fact, in 2004 there was an increase in *jifang*. *Jifang* translate in English to “group petitioning”. Petitioners will travel in a group to the petitioning bureaus to make their complaints. Their idea is that, as a group, their complaint cannot be ignored.

The act of *jifang* seems similar to how the Internet today can amplify the voices of many. Just as one petitioner at the local level may not bring about change, one person complaining on the Internet may be easily ignored. However, many people complaining on the Internet tends to draw attention. Furthermore, “the government is adamantly opposed to group petitioning since it perceives any collective action as threatening” (Shao 2013,42). This is similar to the role of censorship discussed earlier. That is, Internet censorship aims to prevent collective action. While petitioning is directed specifically at government officials, group grievances on the Internet may be directed towards a number of different organizations. However, the government in China greatly monitors the Internet. As a result of expressing group grievances, the government may

learn of the complaints and intervene, or use censorship to shut down the expression.

Through my analysis, I find that Fang Fang calls for something similar to this tradition of “group petitioning” through the Internet.

Fang Fang herself seems to act as a *jiifang* instigator. Fang Fang tells her readers that “everybody knows that once something in China is taken up at the national level, everyone will step up and do what needs to be done” (Fang 2020, 8). This idea of appealing to the national level exists beyond the Internet sphere. Indeed, we can look to the history of *jifang* to see that in recent years, a group of “Beijing-bound petitioners” has arisen (Shao 2013, 43). Frustrated by feelings that their grievances are not being heard at the local level, these petitioners go to Beijing with the hope that the leaders of the state government will hear their grievances. In comparison, Fang Fang does not necessarily ask that her readers themselves travel to Beijing. She does call for her readers, as a group, to be critical of the local government. A consequence of this online questioning of local officials is that the state government may learn about the local corruption. While I will not point out these moments explicitly, this historical background about petitioning provides us some context for which Fang Fang is addressing her Collective.

I have defined and provided context for the Silent Collective. I provided context for the idea of the Collective by describing Xi’s guiding principles of China. I provided the example of petitioning as a means in recent Chinese history through which a group of people can speak out. Thus, there are ways in which people can speak out in China. Furthermore, research on censorship in China, and on Weibo specifically, reveal that the government is not necessarily silencing the Collective. Yet, Fang Fang claims that something like the Silent Collective described here exists.

So if we accept Fang Fang's claim of a Silent Collective as true, what is the reason for the silence? Some scholars believe that the collective does not speak out because it cannot organize in such a way. In China, the state bureaucratic system controls the organization of people. As explained by Xueguang Zhou "the Communist state has effectively monopolized the resources for social mobilization and denied the legitimacy of any organized interests outside its control" (Zhou 1993, 54). That is, people really have no choice but to play by the rules of the State that, either officially or unofficially, forbid collective action. At the same time, Zhou points out that in China there are "positive incentives for compliance" (Zhou 1993, 55). As a result, people may not feel inclined towards collective action.

We can also begin to understand the silence of the collective by examining what happens to those who do speak out. Dr. Li Wenliang is considered to be the whistle blower for the 2020 SARS outbreak. However, after posting about the mysterious new disease he was "summoned for a middle-of-the-night reprimand over his candor" (Buckley 2020). Perhaps people are afraid of speaking out because they fear the consequences. Yet, Fang Fang praises Dr. Li Wenliang and encourages people to speak the truth as he did. In Fang Fang's opinion, the silence of the collective is a characteristic of the condition of the Chinese people. She calls for a shift in the identity of the Chinese people. Fang Fang serves as a role model, and useful case study, through which we can see how people buy into a Collective that is no longer silent. My investigation reveals that Fang Fang writes using seemingly personal forms of address, available to the diary-form, to create a collective discourse without, at least initially, triggering the State's methods of control.

Guanxi

This thesis is concerned with the networks utilized by the Internet public. Traditionally, a discussion of networks in China has required an understanding of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* (关系) is a term that describes interpersonal relationships in China. *Guanxi* (关系) is composed of the characters *guan* (关) and *xi* (系). In Mandarin Chinese, the character *guan* means “to connect,” while *xi* signifies a chain and can be translated as “to link.” Thus, a particularly helpful definition of *guanxi* as provided by Jun Liu is “social ties” (Liu 2016, 69). *Guanxi* serves as a guiding principle in Chinese society and defines personal social networks. Yet, in regards to Internet networks, scholars feel that *guanxi* cannot exist. By using Fang Fang’s diary as a case study I conclude that relationships that resemble *guanxi* play an important role in calling for civic engagement within the Internet public.

Three important characteristics define *guanxi*. *Guanxi* is personal, reciprocal, and often requires an exchange. *Guanxi* refers to the *closeness* of individuals. That is, *guanxi* implies that those in the relationship “know a great deal about each other and share with each other frequently” (Bian 1997, 369). As a result of getting to know someone, people form a personal connection. Furthermore, good *guanxi* relationships are defined by reciprocity because the individuals feel they can depend on each other. Reliability is often considered a result of a relationship with good *guanxi*. Thus, the personal and reciprocal nature of *guanxi* can lead to feelings of trust in relationships. Finally, the exchanges that define *guanxi* relationships are often achieved through gift giving. Gift giving and receiving are an important part of Chinese culture and performing this practice of *guanxi*

strengthens a person's *guanxi*. Similarly, an exchange of information or favors can be performed. This idea is similar to the reciprocity aspect in that people may come to rely on each other.

Research has shown that *guanxi* played a role in communication methods during this 2003 SARS outbreak (Liu 2013). China's history with public health and trust is complicated. Prior to 2020, the most commonly discussed incident of public health in China was the 2003 SARS epidemic. Initially, the Chinese authorities censored information regarding the growing number of SARS cases (Liu 2013, 6). Throughout her entries Fang Fang asks why the government not learn their lesson from this 2003 outbreak (Fang 2020, x). In the 2003 SARS outbreak, rumors related to the virus spread by mobile phones via *guanxi* networks. Many rumors about how to prevent spread of the disease developed. For example, so many people believed that fumigating rooms with boiling vinegar could kill SARS germs that many supermarkets ran out of vinegar (Liu 2013, 172). Similarly, when a rumor claimed that a kind of Chinese herb could enhance the body immune system and ward off SARS, local herbalists reported shortage of the herbal medicine (Liu 2013, 172). My thesis adds to our understanding of the role of *guanxi* and importance of trust when communicating during public health crises.

The history of *guanxi* networks and the three characteristics of *guanxi* are important to keep in mind as we examine Fang Fang's Wuhan networks. In the following analysis, I outline two ways in which Fang Fang uses her Wuhan networks: providing her with authority and providing her with content. There is little doubt that Fang Fang's Wuhan network certainly resembles traditional *guanxi*. However, a much more difficult to answer is whether *guanxi* networks exist in the Internet publics? Structurally, research

finds that at the core of the networks created by Weibo are opinion leaders/ celebrities. These opinion leaders/ celebrities drive the trending topics on Sina Weibo (Li, *et al.* 2014). We may consider Fang Fang as one of these people. In Chapter 3, I investigate the extent to which we can use *guanxi* as a means of examining the Chinese Internet public. I conclude that the three characteristics of *guanxi* outlined in this section lend *guanxi* to be a helpful tool when studying the Chinese Internet public, especially in regards to the role of trust when calling for collective action.

Chapter 1: Establishing Authority and Building Trust in the Internet Public

Fang Fang is a writer. Yet, Fang Fang does not often highlight this fact. However, when studying Fang Fang's *Diary* we should understand that she is a trained writer. She studied Chinese at Wuhan University and has published many novels, poems, and short stories. She claims that she is not an investigative reporter, despite the fact that many of her diary entries are written like news stories. Furthermore, Fang Fang, likely because of her writing experience, knows how to persuade an audience and get her message across. Like any good writer, she is able to convey and persuade without the reader even realizing it. Fang Fang's writing methods aim to establish her authority. Fang Fang directly tells her readers that she has authority to speak for the people of Wuhan. In addition, my analysis reveals that Fang Fang establishes her authority to speak for the collective people of Wuhan by emphasizing her location and by calling upon her Wuhan networks. Overall, personal connections contribute to the authority identified as essential in growing trust within her Internet public.

There are a few reasons why Fang Fang may wish to convince her readers of her authority to write for Wuhan collectively. The most likely reason is that she wants her readers to trust that she is sharing Wuhan's genuine experience. Fang Fang believes that "people in the future will need to know what everyone in Wuhan went through" (Fang 2020, 198). Trust seems essential in having people believe that she is telling what the people of Wuhan are going through. Without trust, readers would likely disregard her entries as stories for entertainment. By analyzing the response of netizens, I examine how Fang Fang's readers are articulating the extent of their trust for Fang Fang's call for civic engagement. .

Establishing Authority to Write for the Wuhan People: Emphasizing Location

Throughout her entries Fang Fang emphasizes that she is a Wuhan native. Furthermore, she emphasizes that she is currently residing in Wuhan. Of course, the title of her English book *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City* tells this fact to the reader from the beginning. However, for her online users reading the entries as they are published online daily, perhaps this fact is not as obvious. Thus, Fang Fang provides a daily reminder of her current location to her readers. This reminder, found at the beginning of most of her entries, usually comes in the form of a comment on Wuhan's weather.

Sometimes Fang Fang seems to both give a weather report and, what I will call, a "Wuhan report". Essentially, she provides an update on the weather, followed by an update on the Virus in Wuhan. For example, on February 4th she writes, "today the weather continues to be good. The Wuhan people continue to hold steady" (Fang 2020, 44). Reports like this, which comment on the weather and Wuhan, are found almost daily. By using the weather as a motif, she establishes that she is physically living in Wuhan. Thus, she has authority to speak about the events occurring within and affecting the Wuhan community.

By beginning her entries with this consistent manner, Fang Fang provides a stable recurrent structure for her readers. Yet, I argue that she could have chosen a multitude of motifs that achieved this goal. The fact that she chooses to remind, daily, her location only serves to emphasize the importance of this fact.

Establishing authority to Write for the Wuhan People: Collectively

I assert that Fang Fang is trying to share the Collective experience of Wuhan. She does this with writing techniques and by downplaying her unique identity. At the same time she emphasizes her Wuhan citizenship. As a result, Fang Fang establishes her authority to write for the Collective Wuhan people.

Fang Fang's uses the Royal "we" to blur the line between narrator and subject. Throughout her diary entries she provides reports about "the people of Wuhan" as a general public (Fang 2020, 4). Yet, she also discusses these same people by saying "we". A clear example of this is found in the introduction of her second *Diary* entry, January 26th. She writes,

Thank you, everyone, for your attention and support. The people of Wuhan are still in a critical phase of this outbreak, even though a lot of folks have already emerged from that initial state of fear, helplessness and anxiety. We may be much more settled and at peace than we were a few days ago, but we still need everyone's comfort and encouragement (Fang 2020).

Here we can see how Fang Fang provides an update on the Wuhan citizens and then includes herself in this same group. Thus, Fang Fang not only reports her own individual perspective of the current state of "the people of Wuhan" but she is including herself in the group experience. Her use of including herself amongst the collective "we" (the people of Wuhan) strengthens her connection to the Wuhan people as she seeks the authority to write for Wuhan citizens.

Throughout her entries, Fang Fang downplays herself as the subject. She aims for the subject of her work not to be herself, rather focuses readers' attention on the citizens of Wuhan. Her English novel is appropriately named *Wuhan Diary*, rather than Fang Fang's

Diary. Instead of focusing on her own specific identity, Fang Fang emphasizes her shared identity with her Wuhan citizens. As a result, Fang Fang establishes herself as someone with the authority to write about and speak for the Wuhan collective.

Fang Fang downplays those identity traits that make her stand out from her fellow Wuhan citizens. For example, Fang Fang is a mother and woman in her mid-60s. However, she does not often dwell on these identity traits. On occasion she will use her age as a comparison to the younger generation. Similarly, sometimes she will claim that she can relate to other mothers. Furthermore, unlike a traditional diary, Fang Fang's entries do not include many personal details. While she occasionally mentions a favorite food or place, these details are sparse. With the exception of her first entries in which Fang Fang briefly mentions her daughter and ex-husband, she does not discuss her close family. However, the main identity trait that she continuously highlights is her Wuhan identity.

In discussing the importance of this shared identity, Fang Fang writes “unless you have lived your entire life in Wuhan, I’m afraid it might be difficult for you to understand this or the feeling of pain that we are going through right now” (Fang 2020, 77). Here, Fang Fang makes a distinction between those who share in this Wuhan identity. She emphasizes the need to have this identity in order to possess the authority to write for Wuhan citizens.

Establishing Authority to Write For the Wuhan People: Networks

Fang Fang establishes, and emphasizes, her integration within the Wuhan community. She tells her readers, “I am a Wuhan native, through and through” (Fang 72). In addition to directly stating this fact, she backs up her proclamation with evidence. For example, on

February 11th she writes “I have been living here in this city of Wuhan for more than 60 years. This city has been my home ever since my parents brought me here from Nanjing when I was two years old, and I have never left” (Fang 2020, 68). In addition to providing this historical evidence, she also provides a couple examples of places throughout the city that (presumably) only people in Wuhan would recognize. Thus, she is legitimizing her claim of being a Wuhan native by emphasizing her connection to the places of Wuhan.

While Fang Fang’s connections to the physical city of Wuhan are prevalent, she spends more time emphasizing connections not with the physical city, but with her connections with Wuhan’s citizens. She paints a picture of her network for her readers. She tells them “my neighbors, classmates, colleagues, and fellow writers are spread out deep in every corner of this city. When I’m out I run into people I know all the time” (Fang 2020, 69). Like she did with Wuhan’s physical location, here she directly provides a claim about her integration within Wuhan.

Many of these Wuhan connections are personal to Fang Fang. Or, Fang Fang at least makes these connections seem personal. She discusses her old classmates, “doctor friends”, neighbors and other various relationships (Fang 2020). She often refers to her connections as “friends”. As a result, these relationships appear to be personal to Fang Fang and she simultaneously emphasizes her personal and integrated relationship with Wuhan.

Furthermore, Fang Fang contributes her Wuhan network almost entirely to her status of a Wuhan citizen. Yet, many people feel Fang Fang owes her successful network to her occupation as a writer (Fang 2020, 266). Yes, Fang Fang tries to downplay the

implications of her author status and instead highlights her status of Wuhan citizen. For example, on March 12, after reading online criticisms and allegations about her intentions, she stands up for herself by saying “writers are allowed to have friends who are police officers and police officers are allowed to help their friends out on their day off; this is all a common part of human relationships” (Fang 2020, 267). This is one of the few examples of a time that Fang Fang even recognizes that she is a writer. She contributes her connections to the police officers to “human relationships” rather than her role of a writer. Thus, Fang Fang is justifying her network by her status as an integrated Wuhan citizen.

Throughout her entries Fang Fang provides specific examples of her network in action. For example, one time she claims to recognize a Wuhan man from an Internet story. By directly telling her readers about how she identifies herself, as well as proving examples to legitimize her claim, Fang Fang establishes herself as a part of the Wuhan community. As a result, she establishes her foundation on which she can build her authority to write on behalf of her fellow Wuhan citizens and ultimately she may create a more trusting relationship with her readers.

Fang Fang’s connections give her the authority to write about specific events. She often discusses how she, because of her social network, has personal connections to Wuhan news stories. For example, on March 1st Fang Fang discusses the death of Jiang Xueqing , the Director of the Wuhan Central Hospital where Li Wenliang worked. Fang Fang personalizes his death by reminding her readers of her social network in Wuhan. She says “I may never have met Director Jiang, but the wife of one of my college

classmates knew him very well” (Fang 2020, 194). This personal connection, as thin as the connection may be, provides her some authority to discuss his death.

Fang Fang’s good *guanxi* helps her provide content for her entries. She often directly quotes or summarizes the words of her contacts. She collects information from her Wuhan informants, Internet sources or personal experience and shares this information with her readers. She spreads the word of these contacts, in part, because she believes they are reliable sources. She considers these people to be her friends, often calling them such. Fang Fang claims her friends are experts in their fields. For example, throughout her entries she often quotes her doctor friends. Instead of naming her sources, Fang Fang describes her sources by her relationship to them (i.e. friend) and by their occupation (i.e. doctor). By doing so she emphasizes the closeness of her relationship to her contacts and acknowledges their expertise.

I have illustrated the methods through which Fang Fang establishes her authority. Ultimately, her local Wuhan networks contribute the legitimacy to her claim that she is a Wuhan native and emphasize that she is indeed in Wuhan. Since both she and her informants are so close to the virus, her readers may trust her information related to the coronavirus in Wuhan. In addition, by emphasizing her networks, Fang Fang illustrates that she is a part of the Wuhan community. As such, readers may feel she knows what is best for Wuhan. By extension, perhaps readers will feel that Fang Fang is a part of the China community and as such they may feel that her opinion on China matters should be highly regarded. Thus, when she calls for civic engagement, largely in the form of collective action, Fang Fang’s readers may choose to join in.

Response By Netizens: Fang Fang Using Her Network

As discussed, we may be able to argue that Fang Fang has a good *guanxi*-network within Wuhan. Thus far, I have established that Fang Fang's Wuhan connections emphasize her authority to write for the Wuhan people and provide her with the content for her entries. In the following section, I analyze how the netizens are responding to Fang Fang's use of her Wuhan connections. I examine how Fang Fang's readers are articulating the extent of their trust for Fang Fang's call for civic engagement. My analysis reveals the measures by which her readers determine the extent of trustworthiness that arises from Fang Fang's writing methods.

Some netizens reject Fang Fang's style of truth telling and ultimately dismiss Fang Fang as a legitimate source of information. An example can be found on an article published by *The Global Times*. *The Global Times* is an English language paper affiliated with the *Peoples' Daily* (the mouthpiece for The Communist Party of China). The netizen, who identifies as Chinese wrote that

many of cases in her diary are not the personal experience she has, instead, from the third-party (like "I heard from"), and several cases are fabricated stories, which have been broke up. But that is really funny that many of such kind of fabricated stories are still in the diary. how can cases received from the third-party be the truth? opinions are opinions, and there are many opinions, truth is truth and truth is the only one [sic] (Jenniferry Cheung 2020)

Cheung feels that Fang Fang's sources, and by extension, Fang Fang's information, cannot be trusted. Cheung is dissatisfied with Fang Fang's use of third-party sources. Cheung is likely referring to how Fang Fang usually quotes her sources rather than her

own personal experience. Cheung does not seem to trust Fang Fang's sources and as a result believes Fang Fang is spreading lies.

In comparison, some netizens embrace Fang Fang's style of truth telling and may consider Fang Fang as a legitimate source of information. An example of such a netizen can be found in an interview in a now deleted WeChat post. Yan Lieshan, a well-known current affairs critic, replied rather positively to Fang Fang's network practices. In regards to Fang Fang quoting her doctor friends he says that

"I heard" means to hear-to hear from relatives and friends. How different is this from the Xinhua News Agency reporter's "according to the introduction" and "according to the understanding"? She can better judge the credibility based on the speaker's credit. (Yan Lieshan 2020)

Lieshan compares Fang Fang's network practices to the practices of a News Agency and seems to be saying that he trust Fang Fang more. He expresses that Fang Fang is a good judge of character and likes that Fang Fang knows her sources. That is, he seems to trust Fang Fang's sources because of she trust her sources. He approves of her choosing which connections she utilizes. Overall, Lieshan seems to think that he can trust Fang Fang, and her information, because of her relationship to her sources

Jenniferry Cheung and Yan Lieshan represent two very different responses to Fang Fang's practice of using her own connections. While Cheung expresses that Fang Fang is spreading gossip, Lieshan puts forth that Fang Fang is spreading legitimate information. Cheung argues that Fang Fang's informants themselves cannot be trusted and that Fang Fang should not spread such lies. In comparison, Lieshan trusts Fang Fang's sources.

Ultimately, Cheung and Lieshan are concerned about learning the truth and emphasize that when learning the truth, personal connections play an important role.

Chapter 2: Encouraging Collective Action in the Internet Public

This Chapter focuses on the techniques that Fang Fang uses to navigate the Internet public sphere as she calls people to stand together against injustices. Fang Fang wants people to stand up against injustices. She criticizes people who sit passively by when they observe injustice. Yet, she seems to think that this is a character flaw of the Chinese people, rather than the fault of a few individuals. In this Chapter, I illustrate that Fang Fang desires people, as a group, to stand up for injustices. By analyzing textual evidence I provide an overall summary of Fang Fang's strategies that invite her netizens into a collective that is no longer silent. I focus on her common strategy of asking questions and of calling upon her confidential sources.

Inviting Her Netizens Into The Collective For Whom She Speaks

Fang Fang is not only writing these entries for her own personal self-reflection. Instead, she is using her entries as a way to encourage her readers to not remain silent. I assert that Fang Fang is, throughout her *Diary*, trying to create an empathetic relationship between the Wuhan collective and her readers. At the same time, Fang Fang blurs the line between the Wuhan collective and Silent Collective. That is, when Fang Fang is including her readers in the Wuhan collective, many times she is also considering them to be a member of the Silent Collective. Using various writing techniques, Fang Fang invites the reader to join the opinion of the Silent Collective for whom she speaks.

Fang Fang invites her readers to empathize with the collective of Wuhan. She simultaneously is inviting people to empathize with the Silent Collective. Fang Fang believes that "people in the future will need to know what everyone in Wuhan went

through” (Fang 2020, 198). Yet, Fang Fang does not only relay facts to her readers. She does try to help people “understand” the Collective experiences of the Wuhan citizens (Fang 2020, 4). She does this by creating a sort of empathetic connection between her readers and the city of Wuhan.

As discussed, just as many people writing a diary may begin an entry by writing how they are feeling that day, at the beginning of each chapter Fang Fang starts by telling the weather of Wuhan. She personifies the weather, almost making the weather seem as if it is the mood of Wuhan. For example, she makes the reader feel as if Wuhan is somewhat sad when she writes “the weather today is just like yesterday-still gloomy, but not quite as overcast” (Fang 2020, 73). As a result, Fang Fang’s readers may feel they too can feel Wuhan’s sadness. Thus, they are also feeling the emotions of Fang Fang’s Silent Collective.

Fang Fang uses the Royal “we” to bring her readers into the Silent Collective. She blurs the line between reader and writer. Rather than simply say that she alone is asking the questions, she brings the reader (and by extension Silent Collective) into the questioning with her. For examples on February 27th, before rattling off a list of 10 specific and investigative-type questions, Fang Fang says, “we need to know things like...” (Fang 2020, 153). By using the collective “we” in this way, Fang Fang is showing that together the majority can break through the silence to ask the needed questions.

Through her entries Fang Fang admires individual whistleblowers. This is just one of the ways Fang Fang emphasizes the need for individual whistleblowers to speak out. As a result, Fang Fang invites the reader to no longer be silent. According to Fang Fang,

whistleblowers play an essential role in revealing truth to both authority figures and the public. Perhaps no other example is provided more often than Dr. Li Wenliang.

Throughout her entries Fang Fang paints a picture of Dr. Li Wenliang as a sort of martyr. She praises him for his attempt to warn others about the coronavirus. Furthermore, Fang Fang believes that one whistleblower is evidence that there are likely more hidden truths. In the case of Dr. Li Wenliang there is a “knot that needs to be untangled” (Fang 2020, 178). This “knot” is essentially corruption. Fang Fang points out that in regards to the coronavirus, whether to listen to whistleblowers is a case of life vs death. She strongly implies that if the government had listened to the whistleblowers such as Dr. Li Wenliang, then lives would have been saved. Her praise encourages her readers to refuse to be silent in the face of corruption.

While Fang Fang does call for people to ask questions, she does not often ask the general public to investigate these questions themselves. However, there are times when she calls for specific individuals in society to ask and answer questions. For example, on February 27th, in regards to the same 10 questions discussed previously, she praises the “brave journalist who dare to speak up” (Fang 2020, 153). While Fang Fang does praise these journalists for not staying silent, she recognizes that this investigative work may not be as easy for the general public. However, Fang Fang does emphasize the need for “netizens everywhere to do their part by helping to shed light on those critical events in order to gradually expose all those secrets that have been hidden away and covered up” (Fang 2020, 153). I assert that Fang Fang sees these netizens as potential members of the Silent Collective. Through instructing the netizens as to how they can begin to no longer

support the silence, she guides the readers to create a sort of “Un-silent Collective” (quotes for emphasis).

Asking Questions

Fang Fang uses questions to incite a mood of both critical reflection about official information and a moral reflection about the choices made by individual agents in the broader system. Fang Fang asks a lot of questions. Sometimes she includes practically a whole page of questions. Furthermore, a few times half her entry is simply a list of questions. These questions, posed both to her readers, to herself, and to official sources, call for moral and critical reflection about provided official information.

Many of Fang Fang's questions are reflection questions addressed at herself. Often these reflecting questions are rhetorical questions that emphasize her sense of doubting. For example, she says on February 7th “My goodness, didn't they originally say, “it couldn't be transmitted between people”?” (Fang 2020, 56). “They” in this sentence is referring to the “disease control specialists” (Fang 2020, 54). Yet, Fang Fang does not, in this case, directly accuse or ask whether the disease control specialists did in fact say the virus couldn't be transmitted between people. Instead, she asks this rhetorical question to which both she and her readers know the answer. These sort of rhetorical questions help to establish her point that her readers cannot take the seemingly basic facts at face value. Instead, her readers should doubt the words of others. In summary, through posing these questions of rhetorical reflective questions, Fang Fang calls for critical reflection about official information.

In comparison to Fang Fang's many rhetorical questions, many of her other questions are answerable. Furthermore, many of her questions can be answered with an opinion.

However, Fang Fang herself does not often provide a straightforward answer or opinion to her own questions. For example, her entry on February 1st contains 12 questions. Only 1 of these questions is a question from another source. The other 11 of these questions are crafted by Fang Fang. The first question she poses to her readers is regarding a statement she has just made about the nature of Chinese people. She asks, “Perhaps this connected to our customs and culture?” (Fang 2020, 35). This question, while a leading question, is really more of an opinion question that comments on the condition of Chinese culture. Yet, this question is quickly followed by many questions that could have an answer.

After watching an interview given by Mr. Wang Guangfa (the specialist who was sent to Wuhan to investigate the outbreak), Fang Fang asks questions such as “Is there even an ounce of guilt in this man’s heart? Didn’t he talk about charity?” (Fang 2020, 34). Fang Fang is essentially expressing her doubts about the trustworthiness of Mr. Wang’s word. Still, she does not criticize Mr. Wang directly. That is, she does not definitively say that Mr. Wang is a bad person. She likely uses this writing method in part to protect herself. Since she does not use definitive sentences, Fang Fang is able to claim that she is not attacking Mr. Wang. This contributes to Fang Fang’s role as a sort of unbiased reporter. Instead, Fang Fang’s questions lead the readers to draw their own conclusions. After asking all of these questions Fang Fang writes in the closing paragraph “forget it, I don’t want to go on anymore about this right now” and she leaves the questions unanswered for the readers (Fang 2020, 31). While, these questions allow the readers to take a stance/side, Fang Fang does not provide the solution for her readers. She does not seem so concerned with the answers themselves. Instead, she focuses on urging the readers to ask their own questions or at the very least ponder her provided questions. As a result of calling for a

critical examination of the words of official sources, Fang Fang further creates a mood of critical reflection.

Fang Fang does not only use her own questions to create the mood of critical and moral reflection. She also quotes questions provided by others to form this mood. As discussed, Fang Fang uses the voices of others throughout her diary. In addition to quoting her statements, she quotes their questions. For example on February 7th she provides a long quotation from a “doctor friend” who poses four questions along with his own comments. His questions are regarding the recent infections at the hospital. He is essentially discussing whether doctors have the obligation to act as whistle-blowers. The first question he poses is “But just because someone told you not to do something, does that mean you shouldn’t speak out?” (Fang 2020, 55). This question, like many of the questions throughout Fang Fang’s Diary, could be applied to situations beyond the present moment. His question is one that calls for critical analysis of the powers at be (the “someone [that] told you not to do something”). In response, Fang Fang does not provide an answer but claims that her doctor friend “was posing this question directly to himself and his fellow doctors”(Fang 2020, 55). Yet, when Fang Fang then writes that’s she “really admire[s] him for his willingness to reflect on what was going on” she is implying that her readers should also ponder these questions (Fang 2020, 56). For she seems to be saying (without actually saying it) that these questions do not only apply to doctors, but to any citizen considering expressing concerns. Thus, she has used an additional voice to emphasize the mood of critical reflection regarding the choices made by individual agents in the broader system

Confidential Sources

Fang Fang usually does not include the names of her sources. One reason she may do this is to protect her sources. Speaking up as an expert comes with a risk of political fallout. Or, at the very least, Fang Fang seems to think so. For example, as Fang Fang points out, Dr. Li Wenliang was one of the first to speak out about the coronavirus and authorities punished him. In response to his fate, she writes “when that is the result of speaking out, moving forward, how can we expect anyone else to speak the truth?” (Fang 2020, 59). While Fang Fang rarely explicitly states that her specific sources fear being ridiculed for speaking out, a main theme of the work is Fang Fang encouraging people to speak their truth, despite the risks. It is safe to assume that Fang Fang hopes to shield her friends from political fallout by being a mouthpiece for their messages.

Fang Fang also claims to have multiple informants. As a result, she further protects her sources. Having more than one doctor friend means that the hostile netizens, or “dregs” as referred to by Fang Fang, will not be able to pin the statements on any one individual. For example, when one Weibo user points out to Fang Fang that she “never uses people’s full names” (Fang 2020, 102), Fang Fang responds

speaking of “my doctor friend” I should make it clear that I have more than one... these doctors are professionals at the very top of their fields; so I am certainly not going to publicly reveal their names. The reason I insist on withhold their names is precisely because dregs like you exist. (Fang 2020, 103)

Finally, on occasion, Fang Fang will stress her lack of *guanxi* with individuals. One example is when she stresses that she does not really know a fellow writer named Er Xiang. Like all Chinese sites, Weibo is subject to censorship. After the censors consistently blocked Fang Fang’s Weibo, Er Xiang posted Fang Fang’s entries on her

own WeChat. Fang Fang writes that she is appreciative of those that helped her publish her work and writes that they “provided enormous help when [her] Weibo account was blocked... when [she] had nowhere else to go” (Fang 2020, 298). Yet, in regards to her relationship with Er Xiang, Fang Fang claims that she “really didn’t know anything about her... it was only later when I read an essay about her that I learned something about her background” (Fang 2020, 316). She claims that Er Xiang agreed to help her simply because they are both writers. By downplaying the closeness of their relationship, Fang Fang protects Er Xiang from also receiving harsh criticism. Fang Fang carefully balances the conflicting role of saying thank you, while also trying to distance Er Xiang from herself.

Conclusion

Fang Fang needs people to join into her collective in order to have them participate in her desired collective call to action. Fang Fang recognizes that it may not be safe for individuals to stand alone against injustice. As such, she often uses confidential sources. Instead, she wants people to join into her collective group that will stand together. She encourages people to join the collective by trying to create feelings of empathy between the reader and the victims of the injustice she describes in Wuhan. In order to form these feelings of empathy, Fang Fang asks moral and reflective questions and leans upon her confidential sources. She encourages individuals to practice speaking out but ultimately she hopes that her collective will, as a complete group, stand together against injustice and no longer be silent.

Chapter 3: *Guanxi* in the Fang Fang-Netizen Relationship

Guanxi is a characteristic of Chinese culture. Perhaps *guanxi* is not unique to Chinese culture. Nevertheless, *guanxi* is a characteristic of Chinese culture. While culture affects many areas of society, much *guanxi* research focuses on the impact of *guanxi* in business (Guthrie 1998). Such research seems logical since relationships, rapport, connections, etc compose *guanxi* and likely improve business operations. Most scholars agree that *guanxi* was likely important for companies looking to enter China in the early 1980s after China's opening. Some scholars argue that *guanxi* remains an important practice for foreign businesses operating in China (Yang 2011). Yet, some studies argue that the importance of *guanxi* in business has declined and that *guanxi* is no longer an appropriate lens through which to study the impact of networks on business in China. For example, scholar Douglas Guthrie argues that it "is increasingly taboo" for someone to use *guanxi* relationships to do backdoor business deals (Guthrie 1998, 255). In comparison, scholar Mayfair Mei-hui Yang argues that in modern China *guanxi* finds "new areas to flourish" (Yang 2002, 1). Thus, scholars do not agree on where, if anywhere, *guanxi* exists and operates in China. Despite this focus on modern day *guanxi* research, surprisingly little research exists regarding *guanxi* and Internet publics.

In general, a *guanxi* relationship results in many advantages. For example, scholar Weiyu Zhang argues that traditional *guanxi* relationships are advantageous in their exchange of "information, sentiment, and emotion" (Zhang 2016, 119). In addition, *guanxi* relationships usually result in long-term loyalty and feelings of trust. Similarly, a *guanxi* relationship invokes engagement, attention and emotional investment. Internet

writers, such as Fang Fang, may desire many of these advantages when establishing their readership. For example, Internet writers may desire a loyal fan base that is devoted long-term. Furthermore, a writer may wish to obtain their readers trust. Finally, as to be discussed, a celebrity may seek the engagement, attention and emotional investment of their fans. Indeed, for a writer in an Internet public, creating a *guanxi* relationship with readers would surely ensure communication success.

However, can writers create *guanxi* with their readers within the Internet public? Weiyu Zhang does not believe so (Zhang 2016). In this chapter, I outline Zhang's reasons for disregarding *guanxi* as a means of studying Weibo publics. In comparison, by analyzing Fang Fang's entries, I highlight how, to a limited extent, Fang Fang manages to create a *guanxi* relationship with her readers. She does this by mimicking all three characteristics of *guanxi*. I argue that *guanxi* exists in the Internet public and that despite its limitations, *guanxi* should still be considered an appropriate lens for analyzing the Weibo publics. I find that using *guanxi* to examine online civic engagement practices allows for an acknowledgement of the role of trust and obligation, both of which play a role in the civic engagement practice of calling for collective action.

Situating Fang Fang's Celebrity-Fan Relationship

Zhang's research focuses on two traditional types of celebrities: achieved celebrities and attributed celebrities. Zhang may argue Fang Fang cannot be considered either type of celebrity. I will briefly define Zhang's two types of celebrities and illustrate how we can consider Fang Fang to be an achieved celebrity.

Achieved celebrities gain their fame due to acts of merit. In comparison, attributed celebrities are "cultural products themselves and are sold to their fans for their fun value"

and “would not be able to exist without media representation” (Zhang 2016, 109; Zhang 107). From his research, Zhang concludes that these “different kinds of celebrities connect to Weibo publics in different ways” (Zhang 2016, 119). Non-entertainment celebrities tend to connect to their audience by discussing topics that are of importance to their audience. In comparison, entertainment celebrities may focus on an emotional component in their posts (Zhang 2016, 120). Thus, in order to fully appreciate Zhang’s research, we should consider whether Fang Fang is an attributed or achieved celebrity.

Fang Fang should be considered an achieved celebrity. Prior to posting her diary entries on Weibo, Fang Fang may be considered an achieved celebrity. As she continues posting and gaining recognition, she may gain some attributed celebrity characteristics. Before her Weibo diary entries, Fang Fang’s published works served as her main source of fame. That is, people knew of Fang Fang because of her books, not the other way around. Yet, some may argue that the diary nature of Fang Fang’s Weibo postings, that include her own self within the entries, make her an attributed celebrity. These people may feel that her entries gained attention not necessarily for their content, but because of her fame as a writer. That is, had Fang Fang written the works anonymously, her entries may not have gained such attention. As such, people may argue that Fang Fang should be considered an attributed celebrity. However, even after she begins publishing her online Weibo diary entries, I think we can categorize Fang Fang as an achieved celebrity. My main reason for this argument is that Fang Fang’s Weibo entries do not focus on her personal life. She, herself, is not the main subject of her entries. Instead, her writings focus on the developing coronavirus in Wuhan.

The distinction between achieved celebrity vs attributed celebrity is important not only because the distinction plays an important classification role in Zhang's research. Classifying Fang Fang as an achieved celebrity may say something about her motivation and values. If we classified Fang Fang as an attributed celebrity, it would likely mean that she used the COVID-19 situation to further her own fame. An attributed celebrity likely has no need for their readers to trust them, at least not in regards to updates on the public health crises. Classifying Fang Fang as achieved celebrity means she can use her fame to discuss the COVID-19 situation. As such, Fang Fang needs her readers to trust her so that they trust what she is saying about the public health crisis. The coming analysis discusses Fang Fang's methods for forming personal, *guanxi*-like, relationships, with her fans. These types of relationships may form the trust that Fang Fang requires.

All this being said, Zhang may argue that Fang Fang cannot be considered an achieved celebrity nor attributed celebrity. Instead, Zhang may argue that she is a "non-traditional" and "non-entertainment" celebrity (Zhang 2016, 120). In his conclusion Zhang briefly discusses this type of celebrity and calls for more research to be done on this "non-entertainment" celebrity. Zhang writes,

One may even argue that users may pay attention to these non-entertainment celebrities for different reasons. The users may have less emotional attachment to these celebrities and their fan objects are less of the sentimental side of the celebrities but more of their views and opinions on social issues. The emergence of these non-traditional celebrities and their relationships with the general public are interesting research topics that deserve further academic examination. (Zhang 2016, 120)

Here, Zhang is defining a new type of celebrity: the non-entertainment celebrity. Rather than define Fang Fang as an achieved celebrity (as I previously contended), I argue that Fang Fang, with her Weibo post consisting almost entirely of her “views and opinions on social issues” is also one of Zhang’s non-entertainment celebrities (Zhang 2016, 120). Thus, we may be able to consider the following case study and analysis as Zhang’s desired “academic examination” into the “emergence of these non-traditional celebrities and their relationship with the general public” (Zhang 2016, 120).

***Guanxi* with Netizens: An Impossibility According to Zhang**

Little research has been done concerning the impact of *guanxi* on Internet publics. A possible explanation for this lack of research is that scholars feel *guanxi* is not an appropriate and applicable lens to examine Internet networks. In fact, author Weiyu Zhang, in his study of Weibo publics, disqualifies *guanxi* as a category for analyzing Internet publics. As mentioned, Weibo publics are centered around opinion leaders/ celebrities. Zhang writes, in theory, “China’s celebrity culture... from the perspective of the celebrity-fans relationship... differs largely from the traditional Chinese term, Guanxi” (Zhang 2016, 108). In defining *guanxi*, Zhang says “*guanxi* has to be personal,” “reciprocal” and “often connotes and exchange of resources” (Zhang 2016, 109). However, Zhang feels that the relationship between celebrities and fans cannot resemble the personal and reciprocal characteristics of *guanxi*.

As a result, Zhang essentially disregards and abandons *guanxi* as a lens for examining Chinese Internet networks situated around the celebrity-fan relationships. Instead, he argues celebrity-fan relationships, on sites such as Weibo, create “a new type of social relationship” (Zhang 2016, 108). Yet, Zhang seems to think that this new social

relationship still creates similar results as a traditional *guanxi* relationship. In Zhang's own words, "this new relationship is neither personal nor reciprocal but, nevertheless, affords the flow of information, sentiment, and emotion" (Zhang 2016, 119). Zhang's research seeks to understand how "this new relationship" can have these results (information, sentiment, and emotion) that typically emerge from a *guanxi* relationship.

The previous Chapter of this thesis provides evidence that Fang Fang too creates relationships that spread "information, sentiment, and emotion" (Zhang 2016, 119). However, unlike Zhang, I do not disregard the concept of *guanxi* as a possible reason for the netizens' attention. Instead, I lean into our understanding of *guanxi* and ask questions such as: Do *guanxi* networks exist in the Internet publics? If so, what are the limits of these social ties? Furthermore, to what extent can we see an impact of a *guanxi*-network in the Chinese Internet public? My analysis of Fang Fang's entries is evidence that internet writers can to a differing extent create, or at least mimic, the three essential characteristics of *guanxi* as defined by Zhang: Reciprocity, Exchange, and Personal Connection.

***Guanxi* with Netizens: Fang Fang's Writing Techniques to Mimic Reciprocity**

Can the reciprocity characteristic of *guanxi* exist in an Internet relationship? In a traditional relationship, the reciprocity of *guanxi* can be seen when friends converse. The idea being that both friends are receiving benefits from the conversation. Often, these benefits may be a positive exchange of emotions. Zhang thinks this reciprocity cannot be created since "the majority of fans are anonymous to the celebrities" (Zhang 2016, 110). That is, "a fan who knows a celebrity, but not vice versa, is not qualified to claim a relationship with the celebrity" (Zhang 2016, 3). In other words, Zhang does not think

fans and celebrities can have a reciprocal friendship. According to Zhang, a fan and celebrity cannot converse in the same way two friends may converse with each other at the supermarket. That is, the reciprocity aspect of *guanxi* makes *guanxi* “a dynamic process embedded in social interactions in everyday life” (Yan 1996, 4). Zhang believes these reciprocal interactions cannot be replicated on sites like Weibo.

I argue that Fang Fang utilizes writing strategies that mimic the reciprocal nature of *guanxi*. For example, Fang Fang uses writing strategies that make it feel like she is conversing with a friend, rather than an Internet stranger. In other words, when reading Fang Fang’s post, readers may feel similar emotions to those that arise from conversing with a friend. In this case, the friend is Fang Fang. As a result, the feelings associated with the reciprocal nature of *guanxi* may emerge.

Fang Fang uses writing strategies that involved questions posed either to her readers or to Fang Fang herself. In the previous chapter I discussed at length the different types of questions Fang Fang poses to her readers. She asks rhetorical questions, reflective questions, opinion questions, and questions that call her readers to be critical. She often poses her questions using the royal We. These questions can make a reader feel like Fang Fang is conversing with the reader. Sometimes she speaks to her readers directly. For example, on February 16th she writes

Right now Wuhan is in the middle of a calamity. What is a calamity you ask? A calamity is having to wear a face mask, being quarantined at home, or having to show an official permit to access certain areas. (Fang 2020, 2015)

Here, Fang Fang writes as if she is repeating back to her netizens a question originally posed by her netizens themselves. In other words, even though Fang Fang is the one who

in fact asks the question, Fang Fang writes as if her netizens are the ones who posed the question. Fang Fang's writing style mimics a conversation with her readers. As a result, Fang Fang is obliged to respond. Fang Fang's questions play upon this feeling of obligation and contribute to the reciprocal characteristic of *guanxi*.

However, since the netizen did not in fact communicate this question with Fang Fang, we can consider Fang Fang to be anticipating the question of her netizens. Anticipation arises by knowing someone in a way that is characteristic of a *guanxi* relationship. That is, Fang Fang may make her netizens feel as if she, as any good friend can, knows what they are thinking. *Guanxi* is created by reciprocal interactions between friends. Thus, in her writing Fang Fang manages to utilize writing techniques to mimic, to a limited extent, the reciprocity of *guanxi* with her netizens.

Fang Fang also creates a sort of conversation with her netizens using questions posed to herself, but asked by others. For example, on March 10th she shares an interview she did for a magazine. The magazine poses open-ended questions and she responds with her thoughts. Furthermore, the magazine asks questions that Fang Fang's netizens also are curious to know. For example, the magazine asks her "Do you agree with the idea that writers shoulder more social responsibility besides just writing?" (Fang 2020, 255). In total, the magazine asks 15 questions. Including this magazine interview in her entry allows Fang Fang to mimic the reciprocal interactions that define *guanxi*.

These examples highlight that Fang Fang is somewhat able to create, or at least mimic, the reciprocity interactions of *guanxi*. The reciprocity is limited by the fact that Fang Fang does not know the name of each individual netizen. Nevertheless, as a result of conversing with her readers, Fang Fang is able to create ties – "emotional

attachment”—with her readers (Zhang 2016, 109). At the very least, due to Fang Fang’s utilization of writing techniques, feelings resembling the reciprocity characteristic *guanxi* possibly emerge.

***Guanxi* with Netizens: Fang Fang’s Content to Mimic Exchange**

Guanxi involves exchanges. Can Internet users, specifically celebrities and fans, practice the exchanges of *guanxi*? Zhang argues that to a limited extent celebrities may be able to accomplish the *guanxi* characteristic of exchange. Zhang writes “we have to first admit that continuity with *Guanxi* exists in the emotional attachment between the fans and the celebrities” (Zhang 2016, 109). In other words, Zhang feels that the emotional aspect of *guanxi*, created by an exchange, can be created by the celebrity-fan interactions. Zhang elaborates that the celebrity-fan relationship can involve an “exchange of enjoyment and fame” as well as the “human feeling that is emphasized in *Guanxi*” (Zhang 2016, 110). Here, Zhang recognizes that should a celebrity be able to create an emotional attachment with their readers, then we may be able to call this relationship one that does resemble *guanxi*. In previous chapter of this thesis, I provide evidence that Fang Fang practices this “human feeling” of *guanxi*. In this section, I will analyze how Fang Fang and her fans may practice *guanxi* exchanges that are more tangible. While these tangible exchanges may not truly be *guanxi* exchanges, Fang Fang writes about the exchanges in such a way that they mimic *guanxi*.

In a traditional *guanxi* relationship, exchanges may come in the form of gifts. In the case of Fang Fang, we may be able to argue that Fang Fang gifts information to her readers. She collects information (from her Wuhan informants, Internet sources, personal experiences, etc) and shares this information with her readers. However, as discussed,

guanxi is created in a two-sided relationship. Does Fang Fang receive anything in return from her readers?

In the second half of her novel, starting around the beginning of March, Fang Fang begins to address her online readers directly. She describes within her entries her interactions with her readers. She claims that “trolls” are attacking her (Fang 2020, 288). Throughout the month of March, these claims intensify. On March 15th she writes many paragraphs outlining her relationship with these “trolls.” She writes that thousands of users attacked her online but that she plans to leave the “ridiculous attacks and comments online for all to see” (Fang 2020, 289). She writes that her reason for doing so is that “most diaries are never preserved, but these thousands of collective curses and attacks will ensure that my diary will last forever” (Fang 290). Fang Fang is of course being sarcastic as she is essentially receiving hate mail from readers. However, Fang Fang writes as if she is receiving something positive from her readers. She writes using the language of *guanxi*.

Yet, Fang Fang does not describe all of their interactions as negative. For example, on March 17th, after being unable to post her daily entry on WeChat, a reader copied her entire post from the day before in the comments section one paragraph at a time. Fang Fang was quite moved by her readers and tells them “I would like to express my sincere thanks to my readers” (Fang 2020, 305). By offering her thanks to her readers, Fang Fang emphasizes that she feels as if she can rely on her readers. That is, Fang Fang’s description of her readers doing this favor serves as an example of Fang Fang utilizing *guanxi* language with her readers.

Guanxi* With Netizens: Mimicking the Personal Connection Characteristic of *Guanxi

Regarding the personal connection characteristic of *guanxi*, I contend that to a limited extent, Zhang is correct in no longer calling the celebrity-fan relationship *guanxi*. Zhang thinks that since celebrity and fans are “not having regular private interaction[s]”, then their relationship cannot be considered to have the personal characteristic of *guanxi* (Zhang 110). Zhang argues that the only way to achieve the personal characteristic of *guanxi* is through private interactions. In other words, Zhang defines the personal characteristic of *guanxi* by the situation in which the communication occurs, rather than by the type of information shared. When defining the personal characteristic of *guanxi* as private, then I agree that it becomes difficult for Fang Fang, herself, to create this personal characteristic of *guanxi* with her readers.

However, Zhang is not entirely correct in his definition of the personal characteristic of *guanxi*. This personal characteristic of *guanxi* can also be created through intimate interactions. At the very least, moments of intimacy can create the feelings associated with the personal characteristic of *guanxi*. Lomanowska defines intimacy as an “exchange that involves sharing what is personal and private” (Lomanowska 2016). In general, Lomanowska researches intimacy as it relates to the digital age. Here, Lomanowska provides us with a general definition of intimacy, even as it relates beyond the Internet. In Lomanowska’s general definition of intimacy, the focus is not on the situation in which a person shares the information. Rather, the focus is on the type of information shared. Thus, if we use intimacy as our definition of *guanxi*, when Fang Fang shares her personal and private feelings and stories, she may create feelings of *guanxi*.

Private interactions can occur online. Messages can be received and sent between individuals. Indeed, Zhang may consider private messaging as practicing the person characteristic of *guanxi*. Whether Fang Fang practiced this private messaging habit, I am unsure. However, Fang Fang does respond, publicly, to individual readers. I propose that these public moments, while not actually private, mimic moments of intimacy and result in the personal characteristic of *guanxi*.

On March 18th, Fang Fang may create feelings of intimacy (aka the personal characteristic of *guanxi*) with her readers. This March 18th entry is Fang Fang's longest response to an individual reader. Yet, she does not share stories and feelings that are personal and private. Rather, she shares a story and feelings that *seems* personal and private. More specifically, the way Fang Fang tells her story, along with the content of the story, may create a feeling of intimacy.

On March 18th, Fang Fang responds to a letter written by a reader claiming to be a high school student. While Fang Fang never quotes the student's letter directly, Fang Fang tells us that the student's letter publically addressed to Fang Fang expresses concerns about Fang Fang's writing. The student calls for Fang Fang to justify her writing.

Fang Fang's response is rather emotional. In what we may consider to be an attempt to relate to the student, Fang Fang describes her past. Fang Fang describes growing up in the Cultural Revolution. She compares herself to the student writing, "my child, I also want to tell you that when I was 16 years old, I was much worse off than you are. At that time, I had never even heard of words like "independent thought" (Fang 2020, 311). Here,

Fang Fang identifies a way her younger self and the reader may be similar: they both may not know about “independent thought”.

Moments like this, where Fang Fang reveals information about her past, are rarely found in her entries. As a result, the memory that Fang Fang shares from her past *seems* personal and private. In reality, Fang Fang is leaning into a very collective form of memory. This is in part due to the topic: the Cultural Revolution. Fang Fang is essentially reprising what other authors have written about the Cultural Revolution for decades. Thus, perhaps Fang Fang’s story is not really personal or private to her own experience. Yet, I argue that this only allows for more chance of intimacy to be created. Readers may feel that Fang Fang is sharing not her own experience, but their *own* experience. That is, perhaps Fang Fang is telling the personal story of her readers. As a result of drawing upon collective memory, feelings of intimacy possibly emerge.

Zhang would likely not deny that Fang Fang’s technique of sharing collective memories can be affective at forming a relationship with netizens. He may choose to classify this practice not as the personal characteristic of *guanxi* but as an exchange of “human feeling[s]”. Zhang does consider these “human feeling[s]” as an associated element (rather than a required characteristic) of *guanxi*. My definition of the personal characteristic of *guanxi* as moments of intimacy, seems similar to Zhang’s understanding of “human feeling[s]”. Thus, I reiterate that the reason Zhang and I disagree about whether *guanxi* can be created in the internet public sphere has to do less with the practice available to internet celebrities, and more to do with our definition to *guanxi* itself.

To illustrate this point, I point out that Zhang and I may agree that this March 18th entry is an example of a celebrity bringing forth the “authentic self”. According to Zhang, some celebrities may bring forth “the authentic self” in the hopes of reaching “the widest circle of audiences and thus a large number of [onlookers]” (edited for clarity)(Zhang 2016, 108). Zhang uses Zoonen’s definition of the term “The authentic self”. As explained by Zhang, “”The authentic self” is performed when the private sphere is brought into the public sphere” (Zhang 2016, 108). According to Zoonen, a common way celebrities can bring forth the authentic sphere is by acting as if they are “the ordinary man who manages to change political seclusion” (Zoonen 2005, 76). Fang Fang portrays herself in this light throughout her entries. Furthermore, Fang Fang’s use of collective memory does not seem so different than bringing forth the “authentic self”. All this being said, using Zhang’s definition of the personal characteristic of *guanxi*, the mere act of moving into the public sphere eliminates the possibility of *guanxi*. That is, according to Zhang, bringing forth the authentic self is not a practice of the personal characteristic of *guanxi*. However, using Lomanowska’s definition of intimacy, bringing forth “the authentic self” may be an effective practice for the personal characteristic of *guanxi*.

Conclusion

Zhang and I agree about many of the practices available to Internet celebrities when forming relationships. However, we differ in whether these practices lead to a *guanxi* relationship or to a “new type of social relationship” (Zhang 2016, 108). In summary, we can describe Zhang’s “new relationship” by using many characteristics of a *guanxi* relationship. Furthermore, both Zhang’s “new relationship” and *guanxi* relationships can result in the spread of “information, sentiment, and emotion” (Zhang 2016, 108).

However, Zhang's "new relationship" differs from *guanxi* in that it is neither personal nor reciprocal. In addition, there is one vital trait that does not arise from Zhang's "new relationship" – trust. More specifically, trust as it relates to obligation. In comparison, the personal and reciprocal nature of *guanxi* can lead to feelings of trust and obligation in relationships.

When communicating in the Internet public sphere during a public health crisis, trust is vital. Fang Fang calls upon her readers to no longer be silent. Following her on Weibo is not enough. She wants her readers need to follow her instructions as well. That is, she wants her readers to be faithful not only to her, but to her cause as well. She needs her readers' obligation. Obligation cannot be built by the sharing of "information, sentiment, and emotion" alone (Zhang 2016, 108). She needs trust. Fang Fang and her readers need a trusting relationship formed by the personal and reciprocal nature of *guanxi*. By definition, Zhang's new relationship does not have these characteristics.

Fang Fang may not succeed in creating a *guanxi* relationship with her readers. Actually, when defining what the existing relationship between Fang Fang and her readers, perhaps Zhang's "new relationship" is a better term. However, when examining Fang Fang's text, we cannot afford to situate her diary within one of Zhang's "new relationship". If we do so, we may miss the methods through which Fang Fang attempts to gain her readers trust. Thus, when examining the Fang Fang-netizen relationship, *guanxi* is not only a helpful lens but a required one.

Netizens' Attention, Engagement and Emotional Response: Due to the Personal Characteristic of *Guanxi* as well as Additional Forces

Opponents may argue that feelings of intimacy (aka the personal characteristic of *guanxi*) were not created as a result of Fang Fang's sharing the collective memory. However, opponents cannot deny that the March 18th, entry drew the attention, engagement and an emotional response from many netizens. As previously mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, we may consider attention, engagement and an emotional attachment as advantages of a *guanxi* relationship. By analyzing the response of netizens, I illustrate how we cannot confirm that the netizens' attention, engagement and an emotional response is due to Fang Fang's ability to mimic the personal characteristic of *guanxi*. At the same time, my analysis reveals that neither can we declare that their attention, engagement and an emotional response is not due to her ability to mimic the personal characteristic of *guanxi*. As a result, we should utilize *guanxi* as a means of examining the netizens' response, while being aware that *guanxi* is an imperfect lens.

Hemant Adlakha is a Professor of Chinese who wrote a piece titled "The 'Consciousness of Wuhan' Amid Coronavirus Quarantine" for *The Diplomat*. The Diplomat is an international online news magazine that often focuses on politics in the Indo-Pacific region. Hemant describes the emotional response of Chinese netizens stemming from this specific March 18th entry. Hemant writes that Fang Fang's letter to the student "sent shockwaves through China's netizens" (Adlakha 2020). Adlakha reports that the reason for the shock [of Fang Fang's March 18th entry], according to Li Yongzhong, China's leading anti-corruption scholar-expert, is that "our generation, including Fang Fang, always thinks that the Cultural Revolution has gone, at least our generation will never see the Cultural Revolution again." (Adlakha 2020). Li Yongzhong is describing how Fang Fang brought up a memory that is both personal to individuals

and the collective. Both Li Yongzhong and I seem to agree that Fang Fang is indeed calling upon the collective memory to bring forth feelings of strong emotion and shock.

However, we should consider alternative reasons for the netizens attention, engagement and an emotional response. Around this March 18th entry, the censors increasingly blocked Fang Fang entries. Perhaps this blocking caused people to pay attention to her censored material. Netizens point out that the censoring of her entries serves as evidence that aspects of Cultural Revolution exist today.

For example, on April 30th 2020, Hainan University's official Weibo reported they would be investigating teacher Wang Xiaoni for his remarks on Weibo. This prompted many netizens to claim, “The Culture Revolution is Here” (China Digital Times). On the school’s announcement a Weibo user replied

From Fang Fang to Wang Xiaoni, I believe that the Cultural Revolution has never left. The experiences of these two famous writers let everyone know that there are still a lot of Cultural Revolution remnants in society, and the Cultural Revolution has never disappeared. This is a nation. Sorrow. Hainan University is so generous, spicy chicken! (Wu *** Xiansheng)

Wu *** Xiansheng draws a comparison between the silencing of Fang Fang and Wang Xiaoni’s. Wu seems to believe that Fang Fang herself serves as an example of the practices of the Cultural Revolution. To clarify, Wu *** Xiansheng is not referencing Fang Fang’s March 18th entry about the Cultural Revolution. Yet, the censors blocking her entry seemingly increases his belief in Fang Fang’s claim that modern times are comparable to the Cultural Revolution.

In conclusion, Fang Fang's use of collective memory likely contributes to the attention, engagement and an emotional response of her readers. Whether we can consider this to be a practice of the personal characteristic of *guanxi* is addressed in the previous section. However, the attention, engagement and an emotional response of her netizens may also be due to the censorship imposed upon her entries. Thus, we may consider the sustained netizens response as due to a combination of Fang Fang's ability to mimic the personal characteristic of *guanxi* (using collective memory), as well as due to additional forces (censorship) that affect the Internet public.

Conclusion

This thesis has focused on how Fang Fang used her Wuhan contacts, consisting of very real people, to communicate with her network of netizens. The majority of Fang Fang's entries seem most concerned with communicating with the netizens of China. Thus, I have mainly focused on the Chinese Internet. Yet, Fang Fang's contacts expand beyond China. To elaborate, one of the reasons Fang Fang's entries are now published as an English novel is because she had an established relationship with Michael Berry, the translator of her diary entries. He was working on translating another writing piece of hers when she began her online diary. He then began translating her Weibo entries into English, allowing Fang Fang to reach an even larger, now international, audience.

With the announcement of her abroad book deal, netizens may feel that Fang Fang's identity shifted. Netizens perception of Fang Fang, at the very least, seems to change. As discussed, many Chinese netizens argued that the publication of Fang Fang's entries abroad provided Americans with the means to criticize China. However, in comparison, some users did not seem concerned that her work is to be published abroad. When asked in the since deleted WeChat interview about why Fang Fang published her diary in the United States, Lieshan replies

Motivation? I hate and even hate the "motivation" of questioning others... When we comment on a person or an event, we should discuss the matter on the basis of the facts... What is her motivation for writing a diary? Does it need to be asked? She is a writer, and writing is her way of living; when a major historical event happened, she was on the scene, taking notes, and telling the world that this is the motivation... (Lieshan 2020)

Lieshan does not comment on whether he feels the book will be used to attack China. Instead, he remains confident that Fang Fang has the authority and thus ability to accurately reflected the major event occurring in Wuhan. In general, my thesis has discussed at length the importance of identity in establishing authority. For example, in this thesis I find that Fang Fang's Wuhan identity, specifically, seems important in establishing her authority. The impact of foreign involvement, or more specifically the perception of foreign involvement, as it relates to authority is an interesting one worthy of more investigation.

Fang Fang's *Diary* was written at a time when uncertainty gave rise to questions about trust. The COVID-19 pandemic required that neighbor trusted neighbor to practice public health guidelines. Only then could groups, the collective, be safe. Furthermore, people had to choose what sources to trust about public health guidelines and updates. It is not hard to imagine that in Wuhan, the epicenter of the virus, people thought about whom to trust. Fang Fang herself often reflected back to the 2003 SARS epidemic during which it was discovered that many officials covered up information about the SARS virus. Yet, questions of trust will remain long after the last person is vaccinated. A catastrophic event will strike again. This event could be a fire, flood, or collapsed economy. Moments of uncertainty are unavoidable. When these events that shake our support arrive, questions about trust will again be on the forefront of our minds.

I started writing this thesis before the publication of the hardback copy of Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary*. Today, life in Wuhan, at least when looking at photos of Wuhan, seems rather normal (The Guardian 2020). Fang Fang's diary may seemingly be only a snapshot of a particular moment in history. Yet, I am confident that the lessons from this

thesis are applicable beyond this historical pandemic. In fact, this thesis is applicable beyond pandemics and times of uncertainty.

Fang Fang calls for collective action. A call for collective action is not unique to China. Rather, it may be unique in China. In many ways Fang Fang's call for action seems to resemble the calls echoed during the American 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement. The Movement encouraged all Americans to join together and demand change. Fang Fang seems to be calling for a similar occurrence in China. This leads to interesting questions about whether Fang Fang's writing strategies can be seen in the Americans Internet public. What is the role of trust, relationships, and obligation? How do these play out in similar and distinct ways in China vs America? This thesis provides many insights into such questions and through synthesis can begin to answer many such questions.

My analysis and investigation leads me to conclude that relationships, or at least the perception of personal relationships, play an essential role in practicing civic engagement on the Chinese Internet during uncertain times. This thesis has emphasized that Chinese netizens can utilize their own local relationships to impact their relationships within the Internet public. When remembering that trust seems to be an essential goal during times of uncertainty, *guanxi* should still be used as a lens for investigating these Internet relationships.

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