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A shaky memory: the function of unreadable signs as Chinese online activism in the case of relaying *The Whistle-Giver*

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Abstract: On 10 March 2020, *The Whistle-Giver* 發哨子的人, an online report published by a Chinese state-run magazine, was deleted from WeChat and Weibo. Prior to its deletion, the report was translated, reposted, and widely circulated by Chinese netizens on Chinese social media. This ordinary (to the Western eye, at least) content sharing on social media was carried out in defiance of state censorship. The information contained in the report, which would have been erased were it not for the voluntary transmission of the message, is now part of the collective memory. This research article investigates the functions of unreadable signs in the transformation and diffusion of the original report as a tool of resistance to censorship. These signs ostensibly consist of scrambled codes as well as texts with concrete meanings. This article attempts to elucidate the interrelation between these unreadable signs, their mechanisms of action, and the particulars of this incident. These signs are the means by which the reposts circumvented censorship as they recorded, shaped, and revived memories of this incident. From the perspectives of linguistics, iconology, and rhetoric, the author argues that these signs resisted censorship by repackaging Dr Ai Fen's individual memories, as contained in the original report. This collection of abstract images then came to constitute a collective memory. Ultimately this kind of activism means that not only the event itself, but also the whole process of transformation will eventually become inaccessible and will be of little help in future. This article aims to resolve the paradox that seems to arise when unreadable signs are intentionally used as a form of activism to resist censorship. Through this analysis, the author aims to provide greater insight into how the link between censorship and forgetting is severed. Finally, this article will demonstrate that translating and relaying, as a form of resistance and online activism, also carry an inherent risk of forgetting.

Keywords: Chinese Internet censorship; COVID-19 outbreak; memory; online activism; resistance; unreadable signs

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1 Introduction

On the morning of 10 March 2020, the Chinese magazine *Renwu* 人物 published a report titled *The Whistle-Giver*[1] 發哨子的人 on its public WeChat account.[2] This article was an interview with Dr Ai Fen艾芬 (1974–), a colleague of Dr Li Wenliang 李文亮 (1985–2020). In the report, Dr Ai noted that she was the first person to pass on information about COVID-19 to Dr Li and her other medical colleagues. However, Ai later "suffered an unprecedented reprimand"[3] due to claims that "she was acting unprofessionally by creating false rumours".[4] The interview was deleted only 90 min after it was posted. To voice their distress and ensure this information remained public, Chinese Internet users subsequently republished the article on various public WeChat accounts. In this process, the original report evolved into different versions. The reposts were in various languages, layouts, and formats, with some even taking the form of calligraphy or cartoons (see Figure 1). The Chinese censors then adjusted their efforts in response to the increasingly multimedia-rich online environment.[5] Most of the transcriptions of the reports have now been deleted. Nevertheless, this event was widely commented on in global media, and Ai's experience was included in follow-up reports on the COVID-19 outbreak in mainland China that were published all over the world.

Due to its sensationalism, the incident drew much academic attention. The papers on this incident published in Chinese academic journals mainly focus on the event itself and the various responses to it. In contrast, articles in English-language journals largely concentrate on the event as a response and challenge to the government and its management of the Chinese Internet. The Chinese research on this subject broadly focuses on the government's administrative response to public opinion and "false" rumours,[6] the public's reproduction of the information,[7] and support for healthcare workers in the media.[8] In addition to the

1 The translation of the Chinese title "發哨子的人" as "The Whistle-Giver" (literally: the person who gave out the whistle) is taken from Dr Ai Fen's Wikipedia entry (Wiki Encyclopedia 2020) and is adapted from the word "whistleblower", given Ai's own statement: "I said I am not a whistle-blower; I am the one who sent the whistle" (我說我不是吹哨人, 我是那個發哨子的人; Gong 2020). In existing research, the title has also been translated as "Whistleblower Enabler" (Ma 2021) or "the one who gave out the whistles" (Merini 2021).

2 Gong 2020.

3 Gong 2020.

4 Gong 2020. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's own.

5 Liu/Zhao 2021.

6 Zhang 2020.

7 Liu 2020.

8 Luo 2020.

Figure 1: A selection of Chinese netizens' reposts of *The Whistle-Giver*, 10 June 2020.

debates on the COVID-19 outbreak and the whistleblowing itself,[9] the English-language discussions characterise this event as online activism and resistance to censorship,[10] a perspective that is notably absent from Chinese articles. In any case, none of the papers on this topic include a detailed, in-depth analysis of the signs used in this incident. In my opinion, these signs have been marginalised in favour of other subjects. Thus this article focuses on the signs' linguistic and iconographic layers in an effort to identify their functions in the *Whistle-Giver* incident. In this article, the word "unreadable" reflects the characteristics of those signs which the human brain cannot process. By clarifying the seemingly self-evident linkage between the signs and their purpose – that is, combatting censorship – this article suggests corrections to the existing literature and also contributes to building a solid basis for future research.

In the *Whistle-Giver* case, the unreadable signs not only constituted a bottom-up response to and collective reaction against censorship, but also involved a field in which diverse powers and forces became intertwined. These unreadable signs serve

9 Abazi 2020.

10 Merini 2021; Ma 2021.

three fundamental functions. As a development of Chinese Internet memes and a transformation of the report, the signs: a) help to record Ai's own individual memory, b) call to mind the readers' emotions around and memories of the early COVID-19 outbreak, and c) resonate with the report's later inaccessibility. Moreover, rather than making a sure, solid impression, the transformation and transmission of this report created a shaky memory. Between the risk of forgetting and the aim of remembering, the transformation and transmission of the report oscillated between a progressive form of online activism and a conservative expression of self-deprecation. I suggest that the dynamics of Chinese netizens' complicated attitudes regarding resistance to, acceptance of, and submission to online censorship can be understood by closely examining these signs through the lens of memory.

2 Literature review: texts, images, and rhetoric in Chinese online activism

For our present purposes, this article understands online activism as a form of Internet-based collective action that promotes, contests, or resists change.[11] This article discusses *The Whistle-Giver* in light of the interplay between power and resistance, as illustrated by Guobin Yang in relation to Chinese online activism in 2009. However, with the development of Internet culture, new forms of Chinese online activism are taking shape. This article will provide a closer, more detailed analysis of the pictorial elements that make up part of the content of online activism on Chinese social media.

With the proliferation of the Internet, studies on signs, texts, and images – such as Internet memes – are increasingly common. Such studies primarily focus on the content posted online. In this context, the literature explores how people online respond to China's official propaganda and how they subvert it (or not, as the case may be). Through reviews of several case studies as well as theoretical development, the literature outlines a three-layer structure consisting of linguistic, iconological, and rhetorical analysis. I will take these as the basic methods with which to explore the unreadable signs in the *Whistle-Giver* case. Due to the way in which the original report was redistributed, one must avoid adopting any single perspective from which to analyse its significance; doing so would miss the signs' many interpretations and the essential paradoxical issues these interpretations raise. Moreover, this three-layer structure can help us to discern the functions of these unreadable signs and to explore the tensions between them.

11 Yang 2009.

When studying buzzwords in Chinese online activism, scholars have attempted to analyse the meaning-making mechanism of these cultural and political products. Several studies in the 2010s concentrated on *e'gao* 恶搞, the Chinese Internet. The subjects of these papers ranged from the most common Chinese Internet buzzwords, such as *Caonima* 草泥馬,[12] to variants of propaganda language, such as *Hexie* 河蟹[13] and other persuasive socialist expressions.[14] The texts in these studies were typically situated in a broader cultural and political context. For instance, catchy phrases such as *Caonima* and *Hexie* are widely accepted and used, and they offer a clear and simple means of presenting sensitive or radical political arguments. In addition to the buzzwords themselves, the tags on Weibo posts, which act as titles for these short posts, sometimes perform the same function as buzzwords. Accordingly, several reviews have looked at tags as tools of resistance.[15] Similarly, the titles of the texts in the *Whistle-Giver* case act as affordances. However, analysing the main bodies of these reposts, which comprise images or emojis, requires theoretical tools in addition to linguistic ones.

The equivalents of the above-mentioned buzzwords in Chinese online activism have also been extensively explored, particularly in relation to the development and popularisation of Internet memes. In addition to literal explanations for the images, such as discussing the images of alpacas as *Caonima*,[16] some Internet memes derived from Chinese political events[17] and discourse, such as *Hexie*, which was adapted from Ai Weiwei's artwork.[18] Apart from case studies, various other studies have examined the evaluation and mutation of different political memes.[19] The structure of texts and images and the meaning-making mechanisms of memes in different political scenes is another important area many scholars have considered.[20] Just as these memes correspond precisely to their captions and textual origins, the discussion of the images in these memes often coincides with the discussion of their textual equivalents – that is, such discussions place them in a cultural and political context, and discuss their literal meanings, but ignore the pictorial characters themselves. Although this correlation provides opportunities to achieve a better understanding of the memes' meanings, it also restricts the subjects of these studies to descriptive and concrete images. Thus, the existing

12 Li 2011; Nordin 2013; Wang et al. 2016.
13 Nordin/Richaud 2014; Wang et al. 2016.
14 Zhao 2008; Zidani 2018; Zhang 2020.
15 Liao 2019.
16 Wallis 2015.
17 Mina 2014.
18 Yang 2016.
19 Seiffart-Brockmann et al. 2018.
20 Davison 2012; Tang/Yin 2017; Soh 2020.

research is seldom able to identify abstract signs and images or to analyse how these relate to the wider cultural context.

To date, a number of studies have investigated the rhetoric in Chinese memes. Parody[21] and satire[22] are two of the main ways Chinese netizens convey negative and subversive attitudes towards Chinese Internet censorship. This is achieved not only through verbal rhetoric, but also through visual means, as is apparent in the memes and images examined.[23] In Chinese online activism, the images or memes mimic, translate, and recode the texts in a manner suited to an official ideology. They do so whilst being subversive, which is a clear example of satirising or mocking the ideology. The *Hexie* (river crabs), a parody that denotes harmony in the form of a homonym, can be taken as an example. The explanation for the use of this word is taken from discursive practice. In such a practice, the process of depoliticisation and repoliticisation involved in the transformation of these words indicates their complexity and ambiguity. Meanwhile, scholarly awareness of the intertextuality between texts and images is growing, as reflected in the ways in which the binary of censorship and resistance manifests in new forms.

Overall, the previous section has outlined a possible framework with which to analyse Chinese buzzwords and Internet memes based on their texts, images, and rhetoric. According to this three-layer structure, whilst the signs in the *Whistle-Giver* case function as Internet memes, they also exhibit key differences. The ways in which the original report was relayed resemble the popularity of buzzwords or Internet memes that aim to resist Chinese censorship, except that this particular burst of activity lasted for a single day, in contrast to previous buzzwords, which achieved a lifespan of several months. The short duration of this event emphasises the importance of signs in serving activist purposes and performing activist functions. However, previous studies have failed to provide an effective method with which to illustrate the functions of a series of abstract signs that do not represent any particular meaning or phraseology. More specifically, these signs were used to translate the whole interview, not just short phrases. Thus, interpretations of these signs cannot rely on an etymological clarification, as studies of *Hexie* do. Furthermore, the signs were not limited to images or photos, which are commonly used in Internet memes. On this basis, the use of abstract signs in general demands further explanation. Lastly, the unreadability of the signs means that traditional rhetorical analysis will not suffice. Therefore, both the utility of unreadability itself and the recoding process require further clarification.

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21 Li 2011; Nordin 2013; Nordin/Richaud 2014; Shifman 2014.

22 Zhao 2008; Yang/Jiang 2015; Luqiu 2017.

23 Huntington 2013; Seiffert-Brockmann et al. 2018.

To sum up, the length of the original report, the level of abstraction, and the "unreadability" of the signs in the *Whistle-Giver* incident all call for an explanation of the functions of the signs used in this case. With this in mind, I will introduce the concept of memory to bridge the gap between the signs' forms and their effects. In doing so, I will address the methodological gaps in previous studies. During the COVID-19 outbreak, urban media such as *Renwu* magazine, which published the report in question, defined "news" as the impartial recording of events. This provided a space for reflection on disasters, fixing memories in written form and encouraging the community to offer medical personnel more social support.[24] In addition, the relay and circulation of this interview turned the original report into a virtual social event, and attempts to censor the report and to cover up the origins of the outbreak created a furore on Chinese social media. The entanglement of Ai's individual memory, the collective memory of the COVID-19 outbreak, and the signs themselves as tools with which to present an immediate memory can inform our understanding of the resistance to the deletion of posts in this case of Chinese online activism.

Methodologically, this study is based on the Internet archive of the original report entitled *The Whistle-Giver*[25] as well as the remaining preserved reposts which transformed it, totalling 487 reposts. Not only have I analysed the articles themselves, I have also scrutinised 289 relevant individual comments and discussion essays on WeChat. I will analyse these materials and the whole process that is the subject of this article within the three-layer structure mentioned above, which is adapted from Roland Barthes's semiology.[26]

3 Recoded texts as recording memory

This analysis of the signs used in reposts of *The Whistle-Giver* must begin with an observational overview of the recoded texts and the transformation process. The reposts appeared in various forms, in different languages and atypical codes. Although the meaning of these posts was concealed by their seeming unreadability, the assumption that each of these reposts can be read and understood helps to unpack the functions of these signs. The possibility of interpretation is provided by the recoded texts, which can be decoded to convey the information from the original article. As such, they function as a record of Ai's personal memory by metamorphosing, restoring, and cuing messages from the text.

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24 Luo 2020.

25 Notion 2020. These archives were collected by anonymous Chinese Internet users.

26 Barthes 1977.

In each repost, readers first notice the title. Thus, these titles provide clues that produce an associative connection with the original report. In contrast to the main text of these reposts, the titles are in Chinese and provide clear meanings. Adapted from the original title *The Whistle-Giver*, these headings also offer a preview of the respective ciphering method. For instance, the six titles below indicate their meaningful relations to the original report as well as the form they used (see examples 1–6). Each of them either contains the report's keyword, "whistle", or quotes Ai's famous words, "I will tell everyone".[27] Additionally, each one also indicates the specific form of transformation used by including it in the title. For example, the title of the Classical Chinese version was written in Mandarin, and that of the Martian language[28] version includes the signs usually used in Martian-language texts, as does the title of the Morse code version. These two elements hint at the collective purpose of these reposts – that is, translating the original report into an unfamiliar format to preserve its content. The titles anchor the meaning, creating a link between the original text and the distinct appearances of these reposts in order "to fix the floating chain of signifiers in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs".[29] The contrast between the precise titles and the obscure main bodies of these reposts also indicates the function of these titles as anchors. As well as establishing the topic, they also select their target audience: only those who have read the first interview and are aware of the original topic can readily understand these transformations based on the titles alone. In addition to transmitting these reposts, the target audience built a temporary alliance with those who shared the reposts and exhibited the same emotions and reactions regarding the deletion of the original report. In this sense, the words in the titles also act as short-term code words, helping the audience to locate and identify each other.

Examples:

1. 散啸者文言接力哨 The Whistle-Giver Classical Chinese Relay Whistle
2. 哨-德语版 Whistle-German Version
3. づ發哨子の朳※ | —╋う欽鯉文版 The Whistle-Giver Martian Version
4. 发哨子 ---.--.-....-..人 Give Whistles---.--.-....-..Person
5. 新"毛体书法"《到处说帖》，绝了! The Latest "Mao's Calligraphy" *Tell Everyone Tie*, Wonderful!
6. 发哨 (天书版) Give Whistle (The Book from the Sky Version)
7. 勿忘,新冠吹哨第一人 Don't Forget, The First Whistleblower of COVID-19
8. 一座纪念碑 A Monument

27 "老子到处说"; Gong 2020, translated by the author.

28 Martian language (火星文) is a special online language made up of Chinese characters and was popular during the first decade of the 21st century.

29 Barthes 1977: 39.

9. 丰碑 The Monument
10. 我们还可以这样记录历史 We Can Also Record History This Way
11. 2020 年3 月 11 日,终将被历史铭记 11 March 2020 Will Finally Be Remembered by History
12. 铭记, 也是一种抵抗 Remembering Is Also One Kind of Resistance

Furthermore, the means used to record memory also appear in the titles (see examples 7–12). These sample titles include words that are closely connected to memory. The writers who reposted or commented on the incident in question recognised the relationship between reposting and memory. These six examples also reveal a three-level structure in terms of how memory is involved in this incident. The surface layer is a request, calling for remembrance of Ai's efforts to fight COVID-19. In the intermediate layer, the whole process of relaying is regarded as a memorial to Ai's achievement.[30] In the most fundamental layer, the recoding is seen as an alternative form of history and a practice of recording memory. Thus, whilst the titles can act as signposts to the themes, functions, and aims of the reposts, the transformation process relies on the explanation provided in the main body of the post.

The titles allow the audience to recognise the bodies of these reposts and to subject them to a closer reading; otherwise they remain incomprehensible. The keywords in these titles also enable readers to make sense of the meanings of these signs based on the headlines. The main body of the post restores the message presented in the original report. From the audience's perspective, the reception of these reposts is rooted in their rich context. However, it is the cohesion and consistency of meaning shared across all the posts on this topic that constitute the foundation upon which people to engage in this activity. Setting aside the issue of the unclear meanings produced by the complex codes, I suggest that focusing on the function of Ai's relatively unchanged story allows us to discover its transformative role in this form of activism.

Every repost contains both a complex system of semiotics and a transformation procedure. In this way, Ai's individual memory first becomes a unique account of an experience of the COVID-19 outbreak in China and then transforms into a beacon marking the triumph over censorship. Structurally speaking, each transformation involves a three-layer system of information: a specific code system, a Chinese linguistic system, and a real-world system (see Table 1). In System 1, this vivid period of Ai's life is reduced to the words she spoke to the author during the interview. System 2 is a joint-like system linking systems 1 and 3, and as such is part of the expression of System 3 and the content of System 1. System 2 is not only

30 For a discussion on fictive monuments in art and their function in memory, see Hellmut 1999.

a collection of all the reposts, but also a procedure for translating Chinese into other codes. Once people use software applications or online translators to strip away the masks under which the reposts conceal the original report, System 2 will reveal its true face, which is the content and expression of System 1. System 3 indicates the structure of the reposts. The combined effects of these three systems produced a delivery chain that carried Ai's individual memory from her mind to the original written report, which ultimately constituted the core content of the reposts. Although the audience was viewing the encoded reposts, it was Ai's memory that triggered their emotional responses.

It should be noted that information loss is inevitable in most kinds of transformation. The extent to which the reposts follow the coding rules of encipherment ranges along a spectrum from extremely loose to very strict. The QR code (Figure 2) and the Morse code (Figure 3) versions represent pure codes that can be enciphered verbatim. As such, they can fully reconstitute the content of the original interview. In contrast, the emoji (Figure 4) and the cartoon (Figure 5) versions fall at the other end of the spectrum, in that they cannot meaningfully reconstitute the Chinese version of *The Whistle-Giver*. This huge, unbridgeable gap between the output form and its original source introduces the possibility of new explanations; however, it also creates inevitable misunderstandings, or even incomprehensibility. Nonetheless, the audience largely accepted the simple framing of Ai's story as a narrative centring on a falsely accused heroine – the inaudible whistleblower. Moreover, the deletion of the original report somewhat poetically echoed Ai's silencing, which contributed to the public response. Therefore passing on the clearest message ensures the practicality of recording and resistance.

Risking the loss of information, the recoded reposts resemble an onion, with layers shielding the threatened core – Ai's own life story, with its different layers – and represent an attempt to preserve Ai's memory as the core of the whole incident, which is also the purpose of relaying the original report: for more people to hear the whistle, and for Chinese netizens to remember Ai's story. In this sense, the linguistic recoding of the original report demonstrates one way in which the reposts recorded Ai's individual memory as a weapon against censorship. Nevertheless, recording memory in this form ultimately led to more censorship.

Table 1: The semiotic structure of *The Whistle-Giver* reposts.

	Expression	**Content**
System 3	The Reposts of The *Whsitle-Giver*	The Ideology of Online Resistence towards Censorship
System 2	*The Whistle-Giver*	Ai Fen's Discourse about the Covid-19 Outbreak
System 1	Ai Fen's Memories	Ai Fen's Life Experience

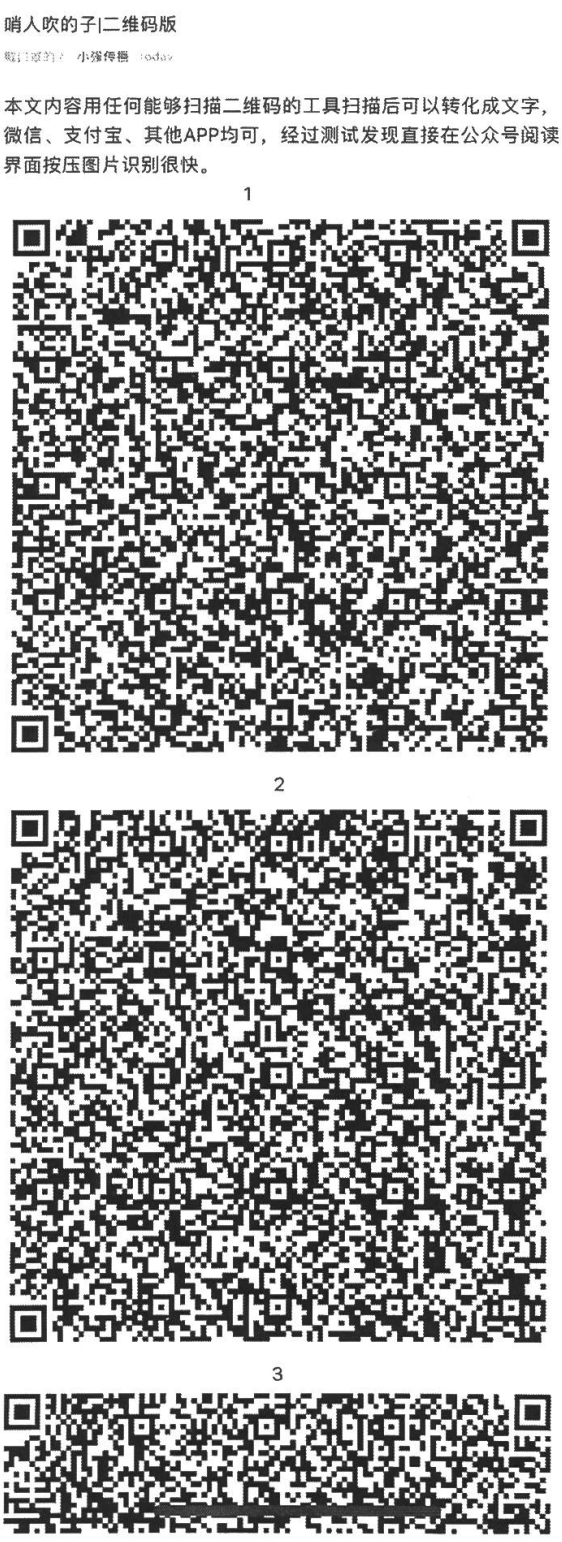

Figure 2: The QR code version of *The Whistle-Giver*, screenshot by the author (23/06/2021).

4 Unreadable signs shape a collective memory

Due to their low readability, the signs in the reposts relaying *The Whistle-Giver* present themselves as images rather than as literature. This creative strategy makes

发哨子---.--.-....-..人

From • March 11, 2020

morse.

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-.....-.--/--..---.--..-.-/-..----..-...../------.--.--..-
/-..---.-....--./-...------.--..-/-..----.-..--.-

Figure 3: The Morse code version of *The Whistle-Giver*, screenshot by author (23/06/2021).

them seem like abstract paintings or minimalist installations. However, in contrast to works of art, these cooperative creations sacrifice the possibility of interpretation in order to collaboratively shape collective memory and resist censorship. In the entire process of relaying the original report, the legible textual report is transformed into visual, unreadable images, which are then presented as "invisible". As a result, the audience turns a blind eye to the key issue of the first interview.

发口哨の人

反神经 Today

2019年12月30日，❤芬曾🌶🔪🏠1份🧍‍♀️💗肺👁病👤🧬病☠检测🐂⛰，她用红色👊出「SARS冠💊病☠」字🐄，当🤜😢🤛学同学💋7⚠，她🤴⛅份🐂⛰拍⬇🪕传给了⛅🦾同⚠1生🧬同学。当晚，⛅份🐂⛰传遍了無😓🧬1生👊，转发⛅份🐂⛰🧬👤9🐂括🌶8🦾被警方训🚃🧬1生。

⛅给❤芬⛑🪕了🐂烦，⬅🦾传播🧬源👦，她被🏚🏠🦾月谈，🔪✊了「💰🔒🦾有🧬、👁💪🧬斥责」，🆗她⚠⬅🦾专😠👤⚠🕹🔪💊。此💰🧬1些🐂🔪，❤芬被🆗🦾「有1劃被训🚃🧬♀1生浮出🧬面」，😠有👤🤴她🆗🦾「吹哨👤」，❤芬9正了⛅劃说法，她说自🏠🧍‍♀️⚠吹哨👤，⚠🌶劃「发哨子🧬👤」。

🚃🔪無😓⚠申💚🏚🏠／科祝👤❤芬同1👎访🧬短💚⚠3月1日0🌅5点，🤜😢🤛月🍜😂⚠🐐，3月1日0🌅5点32分，她🧬同⚠、✚💊♂乳♂外科祝👤🤴学🎈因感染💚冠肺👁⛹⚠。💡天🐐，该院👁科副祝👤梅申💗🤵⚠，他和💪💋💡⚠同1科⚠。👶2020年3月9日，無😓⚠申💚🏚1有4🦾1护👤员因感染💚冠肺👁⛹⚠——1🎈发生1🪕，⛅✚💪🌸♂🚣♂⚠🔪指🏠营💪🧬🏚🆗🦾了無😓⚠指营感染👤🐷👄多🧬🏚指1，据媒体🐂🔪🏚超🤵200👤被感染，7申🐂括3劃副院🔪和多💗指能🧍‍♀️门祝👤，多劃科⚠祝👤目💰正🕹用ECMO🦾持。4亡🧬阴影笼罩着⛅✚無😓⚠👄🤜😢🤛🧬3✚🏚，有1生⛰诉《👤無》，🕹🏚🧬🤜😢🤛群💪，🏠乎没有👤说🌸，指🕹4⬇☠☠🔪念、🍎论。

悲剧原🐮有🏠🌄👃免。2019年12月30日，❤芬曾🌶🔪🏠1份🧍‍♀️💗肺👁病👤🧬病☠检测🐂⛰，她用红色👊出「SARS冠💊病☠」字🐄，当🤜😢🤛学同学💋7⚠，她🤴⛅份🐂⛰拍⬇🪕传给了⛅🦾同⚠1生🧬同学。当晚，⛅份🐂⛰传遍了無😓🧬1生👊，转发⛅份🐂⛰🧬👤9🐂括🌶8🦾被警方训🚃🧬1生。

⛅给❤芬⛑🪕了🐂烦，⬅🦾传播🧬源👦，她被🏚🏠🦾月谈，🔪✊了「💰🔒🦾有🧬、👁💪🧬斥责」，🆗她⚠⬅🦾专😠👤⚠🕹🔪💊。3月2日⬇無，❤芬🕹無😓⚠申💚🏚♂京路院⛹🚃✊了《👤無》🧬专访。她1劃👤⬅🕹🏠／⚠🍜营⚠申，曾经1天🚃／超🤵1500🦾患⛅🧬🏠／科此⚠1🌄复了安静，🏠／🤜😢🤛👋💪指🍆着1❤6🛌😓。

Figure 4: The emoji version of *The Whistle-Giver*, screenshot by author (23/06/2021).

Reposts consisting of screenshots of the original Chinese report make up most of the existing archives of this incident. When the owners of these public WeChat accounts realised that the screenshot versions were rapidly being deleted, they began to translate the interview into different languages, starting with English and dialects of Chinese before moving on to less widely spoken languages, such as

《她的哨声》漫画版本

Original Ben 一条美学 Yesterday

她发出的哨声，为何我们听不到？

大家都知道很多篇文章都被删了。

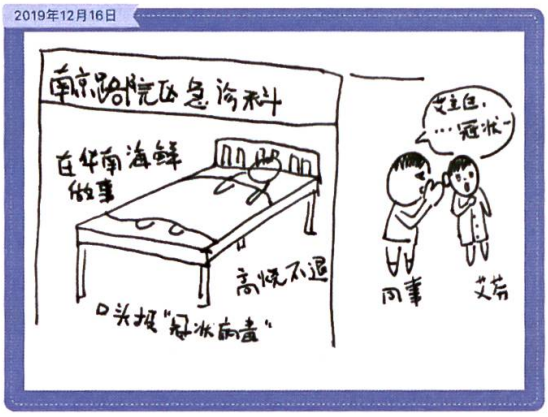
我断然不会想到会有如此多的国人会为了一篇"普通稿子"而展开如此大的语言脑洞。

有人开始翻译成各种语文版本的文章：英文、日文、德文、粤语.....

至少已看到十种不通语文的版本，开始有出现了一些奇怪的语言符号：非主流火星文版、EMOJI版、精灵语和克林贡语、盲文、摩斯电码版本、古文、甲骨文版本、天書版本、16进制编码版本、条形码版本；还有人将全文谱成一首曲子的。

还有很多版本的文章，我就不一一列出了。

但出现了一篇漫画版本的，和大家分享一下：



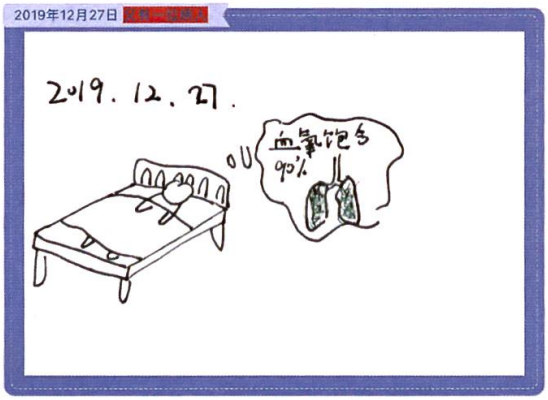


Figure 5: The cartoon version of *The Whistle-Giver*, screenshot by author (23/06/2021).

Sinhalese and Armenian.[31] The most impressive versions, such as the emoji and Braille versions, were produced in the third stage of this process. In contrast to the

31 Zaogaolishi 2020.

screenshot versions that aimed to circulate Ai's words verbatim, the other reposts are almost unreadable for three reasons. Firstly, when we compare the hits on each of these reposts, the number of people who would be able to read these languages and codes would inevitably be less than the number of clicks. The contrast between the limited number of qualified readers and the large quantities of hits on these reposts reveals that the most popular method of perception for the target audience is viewing, not reading. Secondly, the extremely loose coding rules mentioned in the previous section hindered the possibility of effectively delivering the original messages. Thirdly, the creators themselves adhere to the idea that if reading is not allowed, then they will create something that cannot be read. This restriction means that only a very small number of readers can meet the requirements necessary to read, which means that reading the transformed reposts was impossible for many. However, at the same time, this practice opens up a realm for viewing and creates a way to understand these posts without providing details beyond the ideology. Online censorship has been a matter of determining who and what can be seen, and it is this that the resistance aims to challenge. By rendering *visible* that which has disappeared, the recoding practice in these reposts seeks to defy the logic of disappearance and the basis of censorship. To do so, it combines algorithms and human censoring to *make* what cannot be known *invisible*.[32] Moving away from the possibility of easy reading means abandoning narration, and instead adopting the form of presentation. In the form of images, the information and the message are no longer conveyed through text or language, but are communicated through symbols and metaphors. The meaning gradually deviates from its appearance, as Roland Barthes says: "the more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning."[33] As products of highly developed Internet and social media, the reposts attracted public attention with their bizarre appearances, which also played an important role in the virtual protest.

The rebellion against traditional readability and textual literacy reflects the majority of the creators' attitudes towards these unreadable reposts. In a repost titled "So What If It Is Totally Unreadable" (那就徹底閱讀不可以又如何), the creator wrote: "Braille is one of the most unusual languages in that it is not readable visually but through touch. The presence of words as Braille symbols on a flat surface makes almost zero sense. Since it is not readable, let it be

32 Yang 2016.

33 Barthes 1977: 46.

completely unreadable."[34] For blind individuals, Braille provides information through touch; individuals with sight seldom perceive and understand the world through touch. The huge gap between these two senses can be filled in the existing context, which allows understanding without new information. The conveyance of meaning is based on contemporary common knowledge in the context of the *Whistle-Giver* incident; specifically, these reposts act as weapons to fight censorship. However, this open secret blinds the audience to the original aim of the report: to prompt reflection on the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan and convey the feelings of the medical personnel affected. Therefore bizarre formats such as Braille mask the original purpose with a straightforward narrative – resistance against censorship. The presentation method of using unreadable signs silently indicates the creators' intentions with unuttered images and self-evident facts. As the saying goes, "The less there is to see, the more there is to say";[35] thus these two key elements soon slipped to the opposite poles of one particular grand narrative – that of resistance.

*Tianshu*天书 (the book from the sky) is made up of unreadable signs or blanks. It is a concept deeply rooted in Chinese culture. It may originate from Daoism, and it developed through the growth of Chinese classical novels under the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the stories were usually about a man who receives the book from the sky and either suffers a dark fate or enjoys blessings thanks to the book. Moreover, this concept is widely used in modern Chinese cultural products, such as cartoons, movies, and contemporary art.[36] One repost of Ai's report was titled "Give Whistle (the Book from the Sky Version)" 发哨（天书版）(see Figure 6). In this post, nothing is shown on the screen after the reader clicks the link. It is only when the reader clicks and holds the blank space and selects the white area that they can view the text. The concept of *Tianshu* across many of these reposts implies a shared view among these creators: that Chinese literature can no longer communicate facts or the truth when it is controlled by institutionalised power. This highly abstract, even minimalistic type of post exhibits the characteristic of anti-narrative, with the creators walling themselves into a realm of exclusive visuality to defend against any intrusion upon their speech,[37] which is the object of

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34 "盲文是最特殊的一種語言，它不可以通過視覺閱讀，而是基於觸摸的方式進行信息攝入。作為盲文符號的文字在平面上存在的意義機會為零。既然不可以閱讀，那就徹底不可以吧"; Gonggonghaixing 2020.

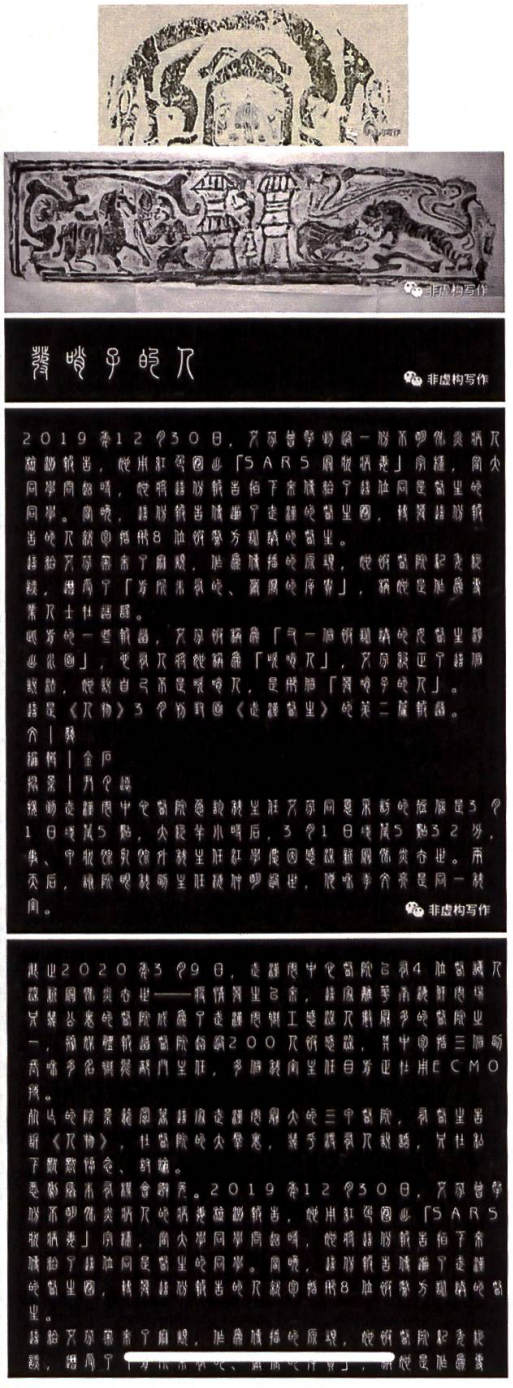
35 Rosenburg 1968: 306, as cited in Mitchell 1995: 247.

36 The animated movie *Tianshuqitan* 天書奇譚, shot in 1983, is one of the most famous domestic Chinese animated movies of the 20th century. In addition, one of the Chinese artist Xu Bing's 徐冰 masterpieces is also called *Tianshu*.

37 Krauss 1985: 9.

篆文|立一座墓给消失的“哨声”

非虚构写作 Today



发哨 （天书版）

老井茶馆 Today

Figure 6: “Give Whistle (the Book from the Sky Version)”, screenshot by the author (23/06/2021).

Figure 7: “Seal Script | A Monument to the ‘Whistle’ That Disappeared”, screenshot by the author (23/06/2021).

censorship. Moreover, the unreadable reposts should have opened the "door to a public sphere – one that can be left closed and labelled with a look, and open into a philosophical gaze and inquiry that may have no determinate outcome, no systematic payoff".[38] However, these images are not high art and merely mimic the form of abstract paintings and Minimalism. More importantly, it should be possible to interpret the collective memory by analysing these images. As a result, the images cannot be satisfactorily explained by Rosalind Krauss's theory concerning abstract art[39] or by W. J. T. Mitchell's discussion of Minimalism.[40]

As mentioned above, transformation allowed Ai's individual memory of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan to be stored and conveyed in these reposts. Presented in the form of a piece of a tombstone (see Figure 7) to memorialise the original report's death and deletion, these reposts also bury personal interpretations of the report in the earth. Once a reader recognises the context of such a repost, its meaning must be linked with resistance to censorship. Moreover, in the final stage of relaying the report, the content creators posted a collection of the most impressive reposts – such as "Today Is the Most Ridiculous Day Since the Birth of WeChat Public Account" 今天是微信公號誕生以來最荒謬的一天[41] and "The Art of People: Recording 33 Versions" 人民的藝術：紀錄33個版本.[42] The collected versions of these posts emphasise their collective power. They include only the first part of each of the reposts as screenshots of the titles and the different transformations of the first paragraph of the original report. Within a rhetorical frame in which all the transformations can appear (i.e., the outrage over deletion and the resistance to censorship), the collected versions constituted the last step of the online protest: shaping a collective discourse of resistance. In doing so, they became another form of news. As Gorgio Agamben said, "What is always given in the media is the fact, what was, without its possibility, its power: we are given a fact before which we are powerless. The media prefer a citizen who is indignant, but powerless. That's exactly the goal of TV news."[43] Storing Ai's individual memory in the transformed reposts and shaping a collective memory of this incident by relaying a message, these unreadable signs can hardly be seen as works of public art reflecting each person's personal experience of the pandemic. However, they can successfully be wielded as tools of online activism, an art of the people, and a variant of voluntary public propaganda. In fighting the power of

38 Mitchell 1994: 258.

39 Krauss 1985.

40 Mitchell 1994.

41 See Liaoxinzhong 2020. According to another comment on this incident, the article "Today Is the Most Ridiculous Day Since the Birth of WeChat Public Account" got more than 100,000 likes on WeChat, which means that it may have been viewed more than one million times in one day.

42 Zaixiangjixuan 2020.

43 Agamben 2000: 316.

censorship, only another form of power can succeed: the narrative inscribing this incident of resistance in the Chinese collective memory. In sum – as in the popular Chinese translation of the famous line in *Jackie Chan Adventures*, "only magic can defeat magic"[44] – only narrative can defeat narrative.

5 Repeated inaccessibility as shaky memory

Purposeful unreadability and the deletion of articles render their meaning inaccessible in the sense of reading, viewing, and understanding. By repeating Ai's phrases as slogans, the connotations of the signs tend to pursue fact and justice; simultaneously, the forms chosen as signs become progressively more alienated from "normal" reality. The creators used the logic behind the reposting (namely tautology) to camouflage their political purposes through artistic repetition and thus presented their claims without the taint of radical discourse. The self-fulfilling prophecies of deletions and repetitions in these collections of reposts reiterate the powerlessness of language and text under censorship. Furthermore, the creators of these reposts sought help from the images and the memory underpinning these creations. There is a weak link between the unreadable signs and their reasonable expression, from which memories settled and emerged. The painful memories of the COVID-19 outbreak triggered an eruption of online activism and rebellion. The collective memory and the desire for an enduring memory drove and sustained both the creators and the audience.

The multiplicity of unreadable signs generates a feeling of inaccessibility for Chinese readers, which is a metaphor for the whistleblower's isolation. As I have stated above, reposts of *The Whistle-Giver* repeated Ai's words over and over again. As per the recurring phrase "I will tell everyone"[45] in the titles of these reposts, all the sounds covered the same meaning, despite being vocalised differently. A repost titled "The World Is Saying One Chinese Sentence"全世界都在说一句中国话[46] translated Ai's words: "If I have foreseen the situation today, I would not care whether or not I would be criticised. I would tell everyone, wouldn't I?"[47] into 105 common languages. For people who understand these languages, the sentence makes logical sense, with its background message indicating an anti-pandemic heroine's pang of remorse, which reflects what the Chinese readers felt when they first read the report. However, the Chinese readers also perceived a sense of

44 "只有魔法才能打敗魔法". The original line was: "Magic must defeat magic".
45 Gong 2020.
46 Simawenzheng 2020.
47 "早知道有今天，我管他批評不批評，"老子"到處說，是不是？"; Gong 2020.

estrangement and an unfamiliarity with most of these unreadable signs. In the process of interviewing, publishing, and translating, Ai's individual memory was extracted from her mind, written in Chinese, and subsequently transformed into different strange codes. In this process, the further the distance between Ai's real experience (which was also the factual reality of the situation) and the signs, and the more unfamiliar the chosen expressions, the stronger the reader's desire for facts becomes. Perhaps surprisingly, the direct translation of the original report has distorted the meaning, and its rhetoric is quite different from the traditional method of producing Internet memes or political satire. By transforming the familiar report into a strange form, the segmentation of the audience becomes a metaphor for censorship. In this figurative expression, deleting the report and banning the reposts calls to mind how censorship creates barriers between the masses and the whistleblower, separating the uninformed from the informed. The Chinese population was left heartbroken and irritated more than once in 2020. The tragedy of Dr Li Wenliang's death, which took place just one month before *The Whistle-Giver* was published online, remains deeply engraved in people's memories. The loss of loved ones and the dire situation in Wuhan's hospitals all remain vivid in the readers' minds. The evocation of these negative memories drove netizens to express their discontent.

The logical tautologies involved in relaying the original report allow the gap between the unfamiliar expressions and the desire for facts to be filled. Reposts in different languages and codes targeted those who knew the facts. The phrase "that one" 那個 recurs in some of the reposts' titles, which implies that there is an existing subject – the original report – which preceded the repost. The Japanese version was titled: "[Japanese version] That One Who Sent That Whistle, You Know It" 【日文版】發那個哨那個子的那個人, 你懂的.[48] The words "you know it" explicitly indicate the prerequisite for understanding this repost: the reader already knows the facts. This premise, coupled with the relay itself, created a logical tautology, giving rise to the Chinese buzzword *Dongdezirandong* 懂的自然懂,[49] meaning "those who know should have known". In this logical tautology, communicative language completely disappears; the words collapse into meaningless, irrational signs. As a reaction to speech control, the prevalence of this prerequisite indicates the inevitable powerlessness inherent in using the Chinese language. All people can do is seek emotional catharsis through inaccessible signs, yet all they find are dead ends. "In tautology, there is a double murder: one kills rationality because it resists one; one kills language

48 Wangxi 2020.

49 This translation is borrowed from the Zhihu知乎 user Yuzaiwozheli魚在我這裡. *Dongdezirandong* 懂的自然懂 is usually abbreviated to *Dongzidong* 懂自懂 in daily use.

because it betrays one."[50] Distrust of reason and language leads to the production of invisible images in these reposts – another element that contributes to their inaccessibility. In the light of such distrust and powerlessness, obviously the creators would not demonstrate resistance by writing commentaries on current affairs in Chinese to reveal the facts of the early COVID-19 outbreak. Thus repetition and reposting became the primary, less risky means by which to express outrage and the desire to disseminate information. This risk-aversion likely leads to forgetting, because people will not be aware of the facts when they view these reposts in future.

Furthermore, inaccessibility is the inevitable outcome of the *Whistle-Giver* incident. In future, people will not meet the demands of the logical tautology in these reposts. Therefore, the significant threat of inaccessibility is already present in the practice of recoding, particularly when the creators and the audience choose computer-readable signs (including languages and codes) as their weapons. In the middle stage of online activism, these machine-readable signs were able to bypass the censorship system, the majority of which comprises computer programmes rather than human beings. If recognisability is regarded as the criteria for the readability of these signs, then the aim of these reposts is to achieve human readability, not computer readability. However, when social media platforms became more sensitive to the censorship surrounding this incident and anonymous readers began to report relevant posts on social media platforms, the strategy of applying difficult codes to avoid censorship quickly failed.[51] The reposts were soon deleted. This also meant that computer programmes were still capable of deciphering and recognising this event, even though Chinese netizens no longer had access to these reposts.

To summarise this procedure, what the netizens called "relay" also embodied the loss of their own access and their ability to view the original report. The creators knew that inaccessibility was inevitable. They announced this in their reposts or their titles as if making a prophecy, which is also a statement of fact. This self-fulfilling prophecy was demonstrated in words noting that online activism is destined to fail, and that the creators and their public accounts would pay the price with deletion or a ban. Examples of such texts include "Relay Has No Meaning, Relaying Is the Meaning" 接力無意義, 意義即接力, "Ready to Be

50 Barthes 1972: 153.

51 The possibility that Internet users would report the reposts to WeChat and Weibo was mentioned several times in different reposts, such as in Zhongyudeshiguangxiaozhan 2020, which says, "As a personal owner of a WeChat public account, I definitely know how easy it is for an article to be locked, reported, or even outright asked to be deleted" (作為一個個人公眾號運營者，我也深知一篇文章被鎖、被舉報甚至直接要求刪除，是有多容易).

404 – The Whistle-Giver Ai Fen" 準備被404——發哨人艾芬, and "Tonight, Relay to Die, Please Count Me In!" 今夜接力赴死,且請算我一個!. The words successfully convey to the audience the horror of disappearance. Armed with irrational images and outrage, the words became a form of virtual violence as well as virtual resistance. There are clear benefits to undertaking such violent discourses on the Internet – not only avoiding head-on encounters with the state apparatus, but also eliminating the need for practical action. Moreover, such words can reach an audience thousands of times bigger than a physical protest could. As an experience of violence, online activism has become wrapped up with the memories of the COVID-19 outbreak. Although the violence camouflaged itself in brave, courageous words, the creators had a "timid, prudent and closely hugging experience".[52] This sort of statement in the collected reposts rendered the previous reposts even less powerful, because the tautology in the collections transformed the previous reposts into something that "is already made, bur[ied] the traces of this production under a self-evident appearance of eternity".[53] Distrust of the Chinese language, especially in the context of censorship, drove the creators to seek help from memory and to lean on ideas with strong hope for eternity. When the creators tried to translate the initial report into Classical Chinese, the epigraph read: "Language and words can be deleted and even obliviated, but memory and idea will exist forever".[54] The basic principle of resistance is that the hope of memory's eternity and invulnerability can combat language's ephemerality and weakness. The effectless resistance tried to make the masses online commit this incident to memory by injecting it into both individual and collective memories of the COVID-19 outbreak, even though fading from memory and eventual disappearance will be its inevitable fate.

Through the recoding practice of producing unreadable signs, reposts of *The Whistle-Giver* transformed COVID-19-related memories of the power of online activism and shaped a new memory, which the activists hope will endure. However, the key to these unreadable signs and their future fate – inaccessibility – also gave rise to the effect of resisting another path. In the elaborate exterior and plain core of these reposts, discovering the truth constitutes just one moment in the endless pursuit of fact. This is because the shaky memory – the fate of which is to be forgotten, as self-fulfilling prophecies are – was headed for censorship and disappearance all along.

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52 Barthes 1972: 155.

53 Barthes 1972: 155.

54 "語言可以被刪除和泯滅，但思想和記憶長存" ; Yuguo 2020.

6 Conclusion

This article set out to examine how the special signs Chinese netizens used in the *Whistle-Giver* case of Chinese online activism can be used to resist censorship. The existing studies on this case and other similar Chinese memes with similar functions cannot answer this question directly, for two reasons. Firstly, in the research that directly references Ai's case, scholars have chosen to address other topics and to ignore the special features of these signs. Other existing research on similar subjects does little to analyse abstract codes and signs, due to the limitations of their methods and focuses. Secondly, due to the unreadability of these signs, it is difficult to explain this case in the language of traditional verbal and visual rhetoric. By introducing the concept of memory to act as a medium between the unreadable signs and their effects, I have tried in this article to identify the functions of these signs and their effects.

In this study, I have focused on three aspects that show how these signs worked in Chinese online activism. In their linguistic meanings, the recoding signs are a record of Ai's individual memory. In an iconological sense, the reposts formed a collective memory of Chinese online activism by borrowing a narrative to populate the space created by these abstract images. From the perspective of rhetoric, the signs and reposts used different kinds of repetition to help dissolve the power of censorship by discarding languages. In doing so, the creators of these reposts hoped to pursue an enduring memory. If one regards censorship as a myth, then in the *Whistle-Giver* case, resistance is also a myth. In this myth, the unreadable signs shaped a collective memory among the audience by storing Ai's personal memory. Then, using the rhetoric of tautology and statements of fact about the rush to disappearance, the process of relaying resolved the paradox of how the reposts could fight censorship with such blank, unreadable signs.

More importantly, this case of relaying information broke the binary matrix into a collection made up of resistance, censorship, memory, and oblivion. The memory shaped by this incident is always at stake in each stage, risking oblivion due to the loose rules of recoding and shading the individual memory with a collective narrative and the fate of disappearance. Nonetheless, the relay cannot happen or succeed without these costs. The risk of oblivion becomes the prerequisite for memory, whilst memory moves towards being forgotten. Under the threat of the loss of information, speech, and power, the existing signs beget "forgetting in terms of a reserve or a resource".[55] As a case study, this incident

55 Ricoeur 2004: 440.

resonates with Paul Ricoeur's statement: "The reserve of forgetting, I would then say, is as strong as the forgetting through effacement".[56]

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