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## The Communicative and Affective Labor of Public Pandemic Diaries: The Case of Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary

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### Abstract

This article studies the immaterial labor of Fang Fang's Wuhan diary about the Wuhan COVID-19 lockdown time period, Jan 23 to Apr 8, 2020 (her diary ran from Jan 25 to Mar 24). Guided by social justice-informed, critically contextualized methodology, this analysis examines how the rhetoric of Fang Fang's diary as tactical communication contributed to enacting social justice during the Wuhan lockdown by recognizing, revealing and rejecting oppressions people experienced both due to the challenges of the pandemic outbreak and the government's inadequate and problematic responses. In doing so, Fang Fang uses her own positionality and privilege to challenge problematic ways political, social, economic, and cultural power dynamics temper knowledge production and circulation thus shaping relief efforts during the Wuhan lockdown. I argue that public diaries are an important genre that can serve to enact social justice during crisis contexts and can make salient the ramifications of sociocultural and political forces on individual bodies. I end with a discussion of implications for future research on public pandemic diaries as a tactical communication genre.

**Keywords:** storytelling; COVID-19; Wuhan lockdown; tactical communication; pandemic diary

*“When an era sheds a speck of dust it might not seem like much, but when it falls upon the shoulders of an individual it feels like a mountain.” –Fang Fang (said elsewhere but quoted on p. 37, became popular during the COVID-19 era)*

## Introduction

Scholars in technical and professional communication have studied the important roles alternative media can play during public health crises, especially in transcultural contexts, and often used by grassroots efforts (Ding & Zhang, 2010; Ding, 2013; Ding, 2014; Ding, 2020a). These communication practices were categorized as “tactical communication” (Ding, 2018) in response to various issues of social injustices during public health crises (Ding, Li, & Haigler, 2015). During COVID-19, we’ve seen a more prevalent form of alternative communication practice using storytelling. Either crowdsourced or shared by individuals, these “pandemic stories” helped bring lived experiences to the forefront of global risk communication sites beyond mere statistics (Baniya & Chen, 2021). In this article, I focus on one storytelling genre: public pandemic diaries. Using one notable example—the *Wuhan Diary* by Fang Fang, a renowned Chinese novelist—a record of Wuhan under lockdown in early 2020 which caught significant national and global attention (Fang, 2020), I argue for the importance of public diaries as a tactical communication genre, especially during public health crises, that perform communicative and affective labor to circumvent institutional barriers and advocate for social justice.

The recent social justice turn in TPC has taken up the term *antenarrative* to emphasize its opening “up a space that invites reinterpretation of the past so as to suggest—and enable—different possibilities for the future” (Jones, Moore, & Walton, 2016, p. 212). David Boje (2001) defined “story” as “an account of incidents or events” that may be “ante” to a more coherent, plot-driven narrative. Mobilized by these definitions, I see public diaries as stories “ante” to more coherent narratives of the pandemic. Studying them can also enrich an antenarrative of TPC research that values experiential knowledge and social justice. Similar to anonymous professionals or public whistle-blowers during the SARS crisis mediating “between governmental institutions, experts, and the public”, public pandemic diaries are a new example of “personal narrative rhetoric” entrenched in domestic and global politics (Ding, 2009, p. 332).

Responses to the pandemic, both in the mainstream narrative construction and in its policy development, have reflected the polarized political landscape in many countries and heightened nationalistic sentiments. They have also reinforced the nature of outbreak narratives as defined by Priscilla Wald (2008): one that emphasizes national belonging and marginalizing “others” who are carriers of the transmittable disease. In China, in particular, such sentiments were reflected in its promotion of the sacrificial discourse for the collective good and the praising of heroic actions of medical workers, as well as the framing of western forces as enemies of the state (Mu, 2020; Yan, 2020; Yeophantong & Shih, 2021). Against this backdrop and that of pervasive anti-Asian hate in western countries (Sotgiu & Dobler, 2020), what is lost are the complex lived experiences of people during the pandemic, especially those living on the margins. Public pandemic diaries can serve as an intervention into such injustices.

Given this global political context, the publication of Fang Fang’s diary in English caused much controversy in China and globally. While some might perceive Fang Fang as an unofficial spokesperson for the experiences of the Wuhan lockdown and an activist to advocate for the marginalized, others, especially Chinese nationalists, saw her as a “traitor” who injected much neg-

ativity to the public discourse and “hand[ed] knives to the west” (Lew, 2021; Liu, Ran & Wang, 2021). Studies of Fang Fang’s pandemic diary across disciplines have argued for its role in documenting and mediating the experiences of the Wuhan lockdown, as a rite of passage and digital mourning (Whyke, Lopez-Mugica, & Chen, 2021), as an act of sousveillance (Fedtke, Ibahrine, & Wang, 2020), and as endurance art (Yang, 2022).

For these reasons, I identify Fang Fang’s diary as a key player in transcultural risk/crisis communication about COVID-19 about the Wuhan lockdown time period, Jan 23 to Apr 8, 2020 (the diary ran from Jan 25 to Mar 24). Guided by social justice-informed, critically contextualized methodology, this article examines how the communicative and affective labor of Fang Fang’s diary enacted social justice during the Wuhan lockdown by recognizing, revealing, and rejecting oppressions people experienced both due to the challenges of the pandemic outbreak and the government’s inadequate and problematic responses to the outbreak in its early stages. Through this case study, I illustrate the mediating roles public pandemic diaries can play as tactical communication during public health crises. In the following sections, I begin by reviewing scholarly conversations on narrative and storytelling in crisis communication, tactical communication, and social justice, before presenting my research design and analysis.

### Narrative and Storytelling in TPC and Crisis Communication

Both the narrative turn and the cultural rhetoric turn in the field of technical and professional communication have argued for the emphasis on how narratives connect people and produce culture in professional and public spaces (Barton and Barton, 1988; Blyler and Perkins, 1999). They push against the binaries of narrative and analysis; reason and affect; mind and body, etc. In arguing for the values of narratives or stories in TPC, scholars urged us to pay more attention to how knowledge is created and constituted through lived experiences shaped by cultural factors.

In their introduction to the special issue on “The Work of Storytelling in Technical Communication” in *Technical Communication*, Kyle Vealey and Jeff Gerding (2021) elegantly summarized the ways stories and storytelling have contributed to TPC work, using “characters, settings, descriptive language, metaphor, and narrative structure” to communicate complex technical and scientific information as well as “to articulate the complexity of firsthand experience into knowledge that is social, shareable, and lasting” (p. 1). Public diaries do both these things. In a diary, we see the author’s descriptive account of characters and settings of the events being captured, as well as personal commentaries and reflections that help readers also critically reflect on the events, constructing a public memory.

Narratives can construct identities and knowledge of individuals or a discipline or organization. For example, narration in technical communication can constitute master narratives about the industries or fields of technologies and sciences (Barton and Barton 1988). Here, narratives may be seen as a coherent account with a plot (Boje, 2001), yet the danger of such an approach is that one master/official narrative may exclude or marginalize others, such as the one of TPC as “a pragmatic identity that values effectiveness” (Jones, Moore, & Walton, 2016, p. 212). Instead, Boje (2001) proposed the concept of “antenarrative” which was then picked up by TPC scholars as both a method and a methodology and a means to counter the official narrative of the field as pragmatic (Jones, Moore, & Watson, 2016; Small, 2017). In challenging this, Boje (2001) defined antenarrative as coming before a narrative, focusing on “the speculative, the ambiguity of sen-

semaking” and constituting a “collective memory before it becomes reified into the story, the consensual narrative.”

Diaries, as a live storytelling genre, exist in the antenarrative space, reflecting the dynamics of storytelling toward a narrative yet also unpredictable and constantly moving. Diaries, while usually following a chronological structure, aren’t necessarily cohesive and can capture the fragmented and in-the-moment experiences. Thus, the diary is a unique storytelling genre that best captures the lived experiences of the writer. When shared publicly, it can constitute an antenarrative that pushes us to refrain from submitting to grand narratives and “to think dialectically, to embrace alternative interpretations, to (re)consider outliers and silences, and to put potentially competing narratives into conversation with one another” (Smalls, 2017, p. 241). Every diary can be treated as “the data used making sense of the past and predicting the future” that “underpin our individual and group identities through articulating shared experience” (Smalls, 2017, p. 240). In this sense, pandemic diaries can serve as rich “data” for people to understand the experiences of the pandemic, humanizing the numbers and statistics they often see in mainstream media.

### Tactical Communication and Social Justice

Diary is not a genre commonly studied in TPC scholarship. But public diaries can be seen as a kind of tactical communication during public health crises that aim to communicate information by circumventing institutional barriers and using alternative media (Ding, 2018; Ding, 2009). Building from de Certeau’s (1984) concept of tactic and Kimball’s (2006) definition of tactical communication, Ding (2009) defined tactical risk communication as extra-institutional, and as an “art of the weak” (referencing de Certeau) that challenges the dominant power. By studying “guerilla media” such as text messaging, Ding (2009) drew our attention to how personal rhetoric “play[ed] the role of mediators between governmental institutions, experts, and the public” during the SARS outbreak (p. 332). Public pandemic diaries could become sites where the personal encounters the public and the political, through documenting experiences and reflecting and commenting on policies.

TPC scholars have argued that narratives can foster critical thinking of social justice (Jones & Walton, 2018) by “encouraging identification, facilitating reflexivity, interrogating historicity, and understanding context” (p. 243). Further, Baniya and Chen (2021) theorized how such capacities apply in a crisis communication context by analyzing how transnational digital platforms worked to build an antenarrative of the COVID-19 crisis that enacted social justice by “revealing and rejecting injustices through critical storytelling and reflections; building collective knowledge via storytelling on navigating a crisis; developing solidarity through fostering identification and amplifying the voices of marginalized people, and establishing transnational and transcultural coalitional spaces for intersectional thinking and collective actions.” Pandemic diarists can function like “citizen technical communicators” to advocate for social justice (Chen & Bergholm, 2020). This is why public pandemic diaries have the potential for enacting social justice in the field of TPC. I will now discuss a methodological framework to study how such tactical communication can contribute to social justice.

I adopt the definition of social justice by Jones & Walton (2018) which focuses on investigating “how communication broadly defined can amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, and politically, and/or economically under-resourced” (p. 242). Expand-

ing on this action-oriented focus, Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) later developed a heuristic of positionality, privilege, and power (the 3P heuristic) to help TPC researchers consider issues of social justice and to recognize oppressions before revealing, rejecting, and replacing them with collective, coalitional actions. The 3P heuristic refers to the practice of centering communication around social justice through questioning how the identities of communicators and stakeholders affect subjectivity and perspective; how this subjectivity in conjunction with sets of relative advantages and disadvantages affect assumptions made by the communicators; and how power is distributed among groups of stakeholders.

Enacting such practices in a global public health context requires a critically contextualized approach that Ding (2014) has developed, which involves six dimensions of analysis: “key players, time-space axes, tipping points, interaction analysis, power-knowledge relations, and contexts” (p. 35). To study citizen technical communication during the early outbreak of COVID-19, Chen & Bergholm (2020) combined the 3P heuristic by Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) and Ding’s (2014) critically contextualized methodology to develop a new methodological framework that pays particular attention to social activism during a public health crisis:

- Identify faces of oppression during the pandemic across mediascape, ethnoscape, technoscape, financescape, and ideoscape.
- Identify activists as key players who push back on the oppressions along time and space axes.
- Understand how these key players recognize their own positionalities and privileges to challenge problematic ways political, social, economic, and cultural power dynamics temper knowledge production and circulation thus shaping relief efforts.
- Analyze how this social activism recognizes, reveals, and rejects injustices and replaces oppressive practices with intersectional, coalitional practices.

Adopting this framework, I identify Fang Fang and her Wuhan lockdown diary as a key player during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when Wuhan was under lockdown from Jan 23 to Apr 8, 2020, both within China and in the global mediascape, ethnoscape, technoscape, financescape, and ideoscape (see Appadurai, 1990). This means considering the roles the diary played in global cultural flow, as she observed and discussed COVID-19 relief strategies and policies before and during Wuhan lockdown since the novel coronavirus was discovered. While the data of analysis here don’t include responses to her diary due to limited space, I will nonetheless consider the circulation of her diary as reflected in her own documenting and responding to the responses she received.

As I discussed before, antenarrative accounts for the often-fragmented nature of storytelling as well as its potential to make explicit power dynamics that shape storytelling and narrative constructions in any given situation. In other words, antenarrative emphasizes the political and rhetorical nature of storytelling and the value of lived experience. Thus, to understand diaries as a genre of TPC, we must pay attention to not only their communicative power but also their affective influence, “a social force animated by the powers of knowledge, affect, science, and language” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 357-358). Pandemic diaries document such tensions and forces as “a means of mobilizing personal feelings, energies, and will power to persist and persevere” (Yang, 2022, p. 89). Adopting Sara Ahmed’s (2015) definition of affect as effects created when bodies come in contact with one another, I argue that we examine manifestations of emotions in

stories as affective gestures in terms of how actors and contexts interact to make meaning of the situation.

Therefore, to understand how Fang Fang's diary performed the communicative labor of sharing information as well as the affective labor to construct a public memory of the Wuhan lockdown, my analysis addresses the following research questions:

- How did Fang Fang's diary recognize, reveal, and reject social injustices during the Wuhan lockdown?
- How did Fang Fang recognize her own positionalities and privileges to challenge problematic ways political, social, economic, and cultural power dynamics temper knowledge production and circulation thus shaping relief efforts during the Wuhan lockdown?
- How can we understand the affective labor of Fang Fang's diary as a "public diary" genre in the global mediascape and ideoscape during COVID-19?

## Research Method

With these research questions in mind, I conducted a qualitative rhetorical analysis by coding all 60 entries of Fang Fang's Wuhan diary (Jan 25-March 24). Informed by LuMing Mao's (2013) comparative rhetorical lens, the rhetorical analysis examines thematically the roles Fang Fang's diary played in documenting and commenting on the Wuhan lockdown period during the early outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. The diary was contextualized and recontextualized in the sociopolitical context locally in China (where it was originally posted on social media), but also globally as it caught international attention and was translated and published in English. Such a comparative rhetorical framework requires that I ground my analysis in Fang Fang's own language and how she constructed the experiences under lockdown, with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2008).

Treating her diary entries as story-based data (Smalls, 2017), I conducted my analysis with two cycles of coding. In the first round of descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013), I categorized the kinds of information she included in her diary based on the source and genre, resulting in four codes: direct personal experiences (including her lockdown experience and diary writing experience); advice/information from friends in the medical profession (updates on the current situation in Wuhan, why, and what people should do); her own media consumption (posts she saw, articles she read); commentaries and reflections on the overall situation (including about her diary writing experience). Then, in the second cycle of coding, I coded these categories thematically using process coding to connote actions (Saldaña, 2013), identifying moments in her writing where she aimed to enact social justice following the definition and framework of social justice by Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019), as well as moments of affective gestures:

- Recognizing, revealing, rejecting, and replacing injustices
- Invoking positionality, privilege, and power
- Evoking affects

Mapping these coding categories onto the kinds of power of immaterial labor (communicative and affective), I arrived at three themes that reflect how Fang Fang's diary performed immaterial

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labor during the Wuhan lockdown as a form of tactical technical communication (see Appendix for my coding samples):

- Revealing injustices by using her positionality and privilege to share information and amplify voices
- Rejecting injustices and calling for accountability and reflection
- Documenting affects

The following findings and analysis section will present the findings and analysis organized into these three themes.

Central to both Mao's comparative rhetorical approach and Charmaz's social constructionist approach to grounded theory is examining the relativity of the researcher's perspectives, positionality and the reflexivity of the researcher. Thus, it is important to discuss my own positionality as a Chinese researcher studying the English version of Fang Fang's diary in the U.S. While I have followed Wuhan's lockdown online from a distance, I have experienced COVID-19 response strategies in the U.S. firsthand. Given the U.S.-China tensions regarding COVID-19 policies, my positionality requires me to discuss explicitly why I have chosen the English version of Fang Fang's diary for my analysis.

This choice is informed by my positionality and my audience for this project. While I saved posts of Fang Fang's diary from Chinese social media as she was actively posting them before I even started the research project, I only consulted the Chinese version rather than using it as my primary object of analysis. But having access to the Chinese version allowed me to verify moments of translation in the English version that were unclear to me and to consider why some elements of the original text were not translated into English. Even though the English version of the book may be considered the "official" version in the U.S., my positionality and privilege gave me access to a comparative lens that informs my analysis, allowing me to address the incongruities of my positionality (Mao, 2013). While my analysis of the content is primarily grounded in the time-space axis of the original publication of the diary, the diary itself also includes meta commentaries about the delivery and circulation of her own diary. Because Fang Fang's diary is both a local and a global artifact of the COVID-19 communication, it must be read as such.

## Findings and Analysis

Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary performed multiple functions as immaterial labor that not only documented her personal experiences and Wuhan's collective affective memory of the COVID-19 lockdown, but also provided information for local, national, and global audiences. In particular, Fang Fang's lockdown diary performed communicative labor through her own privileged rhetorical agency (Greene, 2004) as well as amplifying others who were suffering the ramifications of conditions of the Wuhan lockdown. Using her own intellectual capacities and privileged network as a published writer, her diary also advocated for justices through critical reflections to call out those responsible for injustices. Finally, she performed affective labor that documented the collective sentiments of Wuhanese people under lockdown, countering the dominant positive discourse of winning the war against COVID-19 (Zhang, 2020) with a much more nuanced picture that revealed the collective and individual suffering, creating a rhetorical intervention in the affect economy of the pandemic discourse (Ding, 2020b).



## Revealing Injustices by Using Her Positionality and Privilege to Share information and Amplify Voices (Communicative Labor)

Walton, Moore, & Jones (2019) defined positionality as “a way of conceiving subjectivity that simultaneously accounts for the constraints and conditions of context while also allowing for an individual’s action and agency” (p. 63). Throughout the diary, Fang Fang (2020) established an honest ethos by stating her subjectivity in relation to the residents of Wuhan under lockdown, as someone who’s a “Wuhan native, through and through” (p. 76) and a writer. She positioned herself as a firsthand witness to the Wuhan lockdown and a concerned citizen who wanted to hold accountable those responsible and to suffer along with the Wuhanese people. This is how she saw her own positionality and privilege in relation to fellow Wuhanese under lockdown:

Sometimes I feel like an old hen assigned to protect those people and things that have been abandoned by history and those lives that have been ignored by society as it advances forward. My job is to spend time with them, give them warmth, and encourage them” (p. 112).

Even as she claimed her purpose as purely personal, she was motivated by a larger civic responsibility, embodying an “intersubjectivity” à la Arendt. In exploring the politics of storytelling, anthropologist Michael Jackson (2013) argued that the “tension between being for oneself and being for another” “informs every intersubjective encounter” (p. 47). Jackson saw storytelling as a potentially empowering tool for people to claim “a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances” (p. 34). When Fang Fang highlighted her purely personal motivation for keeping the diary, she nonetheless transformed her so-called “individual record” into public meanings.

When Fang Fang connected her experiences and feelings with other residents of Wuhan, her personal story became allegorical, even while claiming her own agency in sharing her story while rejecting being treated as a representative voice (Fang, 2020, p. 179). According to Amy Shuman (2005), “entitlement” is linked to “credibility:” who is entitled to tell what story can affect the credibility of the story. While constructing her own agency and credibility for telling stories, Fang Fang recognized her limited positionality and drew attention to other stories of people who were suffering more than she did, such as people with chronic diseases who couldn’t gain access to other medical care (p. 92). When she discussed medical information or coronavirus related statistics or stories or events she heard elsewhere, she took care to verify its accuracy before sharing. As a result, she was able to share helpful information and amplify the voices of residents in Wuhan even as her credibility was challenged and her voice censored.

Here are some of the problems she documented. On Jan 27, she noted that “[o]ne thing that citizens are more concerned about right now is the shortage of face masks” (p. 8). Her accounts revealed problems of price inflation of masks and the shortage of more effective N95 masks, which led to people having to wear disposable masks longer than they should just to ration good masks, or to buy used or poor-quality masks. On Jan 29, she recorded that “it is extremely difficult to get a bed at any hospital” (p. 17). On Feb 8, she called attention to people who “set the heart of this city at ease” but were often overlooked: food delivery people; police officers, and sanitation workers. On Feb 14, she shared concerns for other patients who had been deferring their care when coronavirus patients were prioritized. She also discussed the difficulties medical professionals experienced when the outbreak first began, highlighting how the early negligence from the government led to the loss of several medical experts (see Feb 18; Mar 3). She critiqued the “group-buying model” for food deliveries, which was inconvenient for residents and sometimes

caused “unreasonable burden on the volunteers” (p. 146). Through sharing stories she observed in her personal networks as well as in the media, she revealed the injustices caused by the bureaucratic inadequacies and lack of infrastructural support for people under lockdown.

As a middle-class intellectual and a published author, Fang Fang also used her diary as a space to share important information related to the coronavirus by taking advantage of her personal connections with medical professionals, sometimes to verify information she saw in the media and sometimes to gain guidance on how to better support the management of the pandemic as ordinary citizens (see p. 46, p. 71, p. 100, p. 109, p. 154, p. 188). This was particularly helpful in revealing injustices. From her account, readers could learn how the virus was first discovered and spread in hospitals and the perspectives of medical professionals on the status of medical facilities at the time. For example, in the Feb 17 entry, she summarized the points from a conversation with a doctor friend on the current standing with the outbreak, including clarifying how a “turning point” meant different things for medical professionals and the public; the number of medical professionals who had been infected; whether hospitals in Wuhan were using traditional Chinese medicine to treat COVID-19 patients; and what percentage of patients were considered critical and their recovery rate. Such information provided much needed tactical transparency that the government was lacking in its own communications.

### Rejecting Injustices and Calling for Accountability and Reflection (Communicative Labor)

By documenting the problems and challenges people experienced under lockdown and seeking their causes, Fang Fang recognized and revealed injustices caused by the challenges of the scale of the outbreak and the ways the early response was mishandled. In turn, she also pointed out the problems of a rising “pandemic nationalism” (Zhang, 2020; Yeophantong & Shih, 2021) through critical reflection, serving her civic role as a privileged citizen by performing communicative labor to call for accountability from the government for the negligence of the early outbreak. Such labor invited readers to reflect alongside her and to act upon injustices.

Her rejection of injustices was action-oriented. She directly addressed government officials and news media, questioning their problematic actions and asking for clarifications, consequences, and corrections. She was among the critical voices when the whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang was punished for “spreading rumor” and when local officials still denied person-to-person transmission and organized large gatherings (p. 7). But the critiques and calls for responsibility and consequences became especially vociferous in the second half of her diary when she repeatedly and vehemently requested detailed investigations into what happened during the early stages of the outbreak in Wuhan. Her March 3 entry is titled “You need to give us all an explanation” (p. 205) where she called for answers to what happened in the Wuhan Central Hospital. Addressing administrators and superiors of the hospital, she says:

You can't just write everything off by simply hiding behind the fact that 'this is a new virus so we didn't have enough knowledge about how to respond!' That's not an excuse. . . when so many lives are dangling before you, we need people to stand up and take responsibility: You people, that's right, you! Stand up and repent! (p. 208–209).

Her call for accountability included specific suggestions such as firing responsible officials and even reevaluating the Chinese bureaucratic system. When discussing what happened to Wuhan Central Hospital, she said, “if someone has to take the blame and resign, let's start with the secretary and director of Central Hospital” (p. 244).

These critiques subjected her to online attacks and censorship, an injustice that infringed upon her freedom of speech. Not only were her diary entries repeatedly deleted on Weibo and her account was frozen several times, even her friend's WeChat public account, which was used to share her diary, was repeatedly shut down (Er Xiang, 2020). Coordinated attacks on her diary and her personhood also reflected the affective economy of Chinese digital nationalism, intensified by COVID-19 (Zhang, 2020), which Fang Fang shrewdly pointed out in her responses to these censorship measures. She was keenly aware of the "infodemic" during the pandemic, casting doubts on official statistics of people who were infected or died of the coronavirus (p. 123, p. 132) as well as how this infodemic was embedded in the broader ideological information control system of the government, enacted both through direct censoring and flooding social media with belligerent trolls and "politically correct" dominant discourse (Roberts, 2018; also see Ruan, Knockel, & Crete-Nishihata, 2020). She compared this kind of attack to the Cultural Revolution era by questioning the information control system that allowed the festering of such discourse (p. 118).

Recognizing the flaws of the government bureaucratic system and its tendency to focus on formalities and appearances, she commended any opportunities or incidences when people were able to speak up either online or in person. On March 5, a popular internet video showed people shouting from their apartment windows about the fakeness of the visit by central government leaders to a district in Wuhan. Through a friend, Fang Fang learned that the central government actually had a meeting to address the outcry later that day. She comments:

Take a look, isn't this great? If those people hadn't shouted out from their windows, how would the leaders ever know the difficulties the people are going through? If they just remain silent and go along with the charade, aren't they the ones who will end up suffering? So if they have something to scream about, they should speak up! While it can be very difficult to find your own voice outside the majority, it is still important to foster those individual voices, no? (p. 221)

While Fang Fang recognized the flaws of bureaucracy, she was genuine in her suggestions to correct the mistakes and hold the corrupted individuals accountable, never questioning the sovereignty of the nation state. From the beginning on Jan 29, she proclaimed her allegiance to the government: "I am dedicated to standing side by side with the government and all the people of Wuhan, fully committed to battle this outbreak together. I am also 100 percent committed to accommodating any and all requests made of me by the government" (p. 20). She repeatedly praised the lockdown strategies and government actions in controlling the pandemic when progress began to be made. On Feb 13, she noted "the government actions taken to control the outbreak are proving to be increasingly effective. Over time, they are also gradually finding methods that are more humanistic" (p. 87). However, such positivity was less seen in later entries as the lockdown dragged on, as her affective trajectory reflects.

### Documenting Affect (Affective Labor)

By calling for accountability and actions to address injustices, Fang Fang also intervened in the dominant affective economy of "positive energy" by performing affective labor. We can hear the frustration and anger in her questioning such as the passage that I quoted above. Here, I understand "affect" as employed by Sara Ahmed (2015) in terms of "affective economy" which connotes "the circulation between objects and signs (=the accumulation of affective value)" (p. 45). Therefore, affect is understood not as emotions residing in individuals but as effects created when bodies (human or nonhuman) come in contact with one another that generate a circulatory power which is shaped by and also shapes the politics of social discourse and culture. As is typi-

cal in the personal diary genre, Fang Fang often discussed her emotional journeys throughout the lockdown. One might thus understand such emotions as residing in her person. But when read in the context of this public diary, such understanding is limited. Instead, when publicized, Fang Fang’s emotions were thrust into the broader affective economy of Wuhan during the COVID-19 lockdown when cultural, social, economic, and political forces came together to interact with the lived experiences of residents under lockdown.

Ding (2014) argued that it is important to understand the spatial and temporal development of a public health crisis when understanding the rhetorics of crisis communication, identifying tipping points that are significant moments during the crisis. To analyze the affective labor of Fang Fang’s diary, I identified tipping points documented in her diary that reflected not only the development of the lockdown policies but also significant moments that influenced her storytelling. In so doing, I construct a timeline (see Table 1) that illustrates how Fang Fang used affective labor to produce a collective subjectivity of the Wuhanese people under lockdown (Hardt, 1999). In this affective timeline, I highlight particularly the “negative” feelings of sadness, hopelessness, anger, and frustration, because these feelings challenged and intervened with the national discourse of “positive energy”, epitomized by the broad and simplistic narrative of empathy, resilience, solidarity, and national pride (Yeophantong & Shih, 2021). But it is important to note that we must not just see these emotions as negative, but also as (potentially) action-inspiring affects.

Table 1. The Affective Timeline of Fang Fang’s Diary

Tipping points	Affective gestures
Beginning of lockdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Feeling pathetic when having to reuse disposable masks (Jan. 27)</li> <li>● Feeling like a community when people helped each other out (Jan. 28)</li> <li>● “The cruelty of reality” (Jan. 30, p. 20)</li> <li>● Feeling guilty for feeling scared and anxious while others are working hard (Jan. 31)</li> <li>● Nostalgic for the usual excitement of Chinese New Year (Feb. 1)</li> <li>● Hope: when military entered Wuhan and temporary hospitals were built (Feb. 5)</li> </ul>

Tipping points	Affective gestures
Death of Dr. Li Wenliang (Feb. 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Feb. 6–7: “heartbroken” (p. 56); “depression, sadness, and anger” (p. 57)</li> <li>● “living in a daze” (Feb. 12, p. 78)</li> <li>● “the people of Wuhan are starting to grow more depressed about the overall situation” (Feb. 12, p. 81)</li> <li>● Anger: “shouting political slogans is not going to ease the pain that the people of Wuhan are going through” (Feb. 12, p. 81–82)</li> </ul>
Fang Fang’s Weibo account suspended (Feb. 15) Order No. 2 for a complete lockdown (Feb. 15) Strictest order on quarantine (Feb. 17)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hopelessness: when attacked and censored online: “You are left shocked, saddened, and angry, and eventually you get used to it” (Feb. 15, p. 95)</li> <li>● “Besides helplessness there is only helplessness” (Feb. 17, p. 113)</li> </ul>
Fang Fang’s Weibo account unfrozen (Feb. 24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Exacerbated pain, no tears left (Feb. 24)</li> <li>● “weary and depressed” (Feb. 28, p. 183)</li> <li>● “bitter sadness” (Mar. 2, p. 199)</li> <li>● Anger and frustration: Critiques of “positive energy” and “gratitude” (Mar. 5, Mar 7)</li> </ul>
Zero new case (Mar. 19)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Anxiety, fragile state of mind” (Mar. 20, p. 320)</li> <li>● No need to panic anymore (Mar. 21)</li> </ul>

One can see the rollercoaster of emotions here. While at the beginning her feelings were more mixed, the rest of the time was filled with depression, sadness, hopelessness, anger, and anxiety. Meanwhile, the official discourse from the Chinese state was dominated by the emotional pedagogy of “fighting the pandemic battle” (The State Council Information Office of the Republic of China, 2020). Debra Gould (2012) defined “emotional pedagogy” as “a template for what and how to feel” (p. 103). This dominant national discourse on fighting the pandemic focused on emphasizing the resilience of and the solidarity with the Wuhan people, and national pride (Yeophantong & Shih, 2021). But this emotional pedagogy was not only indoctrinated through top-down control (such as the censorship of Fang Fang’s posts) but also the mobilization of the nationalist discourse of solidarity and collective sacrifice (such as shouting political slogans). This emotional pedagogy of positive energy has its roots in earlier CCP ideologies but has particularly flourished since Xi Jinping took power in 2012, permeating political discourse and people’s everyday life, with its essence being that “people should act positively, speak positively, and, ... think positively” and that sacrifice is both good for the collective benefit and for individuals (Chen & Wang, 2019, p. 208). Per this logic, staying under lockdown at all costs during the pandemic and still singing praises for this

measure could heighten psychological strains on people in Wuhan, as Fang Fang pointed out after 40 days into quarantine:

However, the label ‘positive energy’ keeps getting periodically thrust on those individuals who are just trying to find an outlet for release. It is a label that sounds completely appropriate and proper, the kind of label that a lot of people are eager to champion. But if you cry and make all your complaints public, they will claim that you are creating a panic, you are sabotaging the war against the coronavirus, and you’ve become part of the ‘negative energy’ (p. 201–202).

Therefore, Fang Fang was determined to use her diary to document the “negative energy,” not only for her own psychological needs but for other Wuhanese people as well, thus constructing what Gould (2012) called an “emotional habitus” to which people in Wuhan were disposed collectively. Gould defined emotional habitus as “operating beneath conscious awareness, [providing] members with an emotional disposition, with a sense of what and how to feel, with labels for their feelings, with schemas about what feelings are and what they mean, with ways of figuring out and understanding what they are feeling” (p. 103). The lockdown period saw people in Wuhan developing an emotional habitus full of diverse feelings, humanizing individual experiences. The affective labor that Fang Fang’s diary performed focused on making apparent these emotional struggles people experienced, between the emotional habitus of pain, despair, anger and the emotional pedagogy of positive energy and gratitude.

Both the political ideologies of “positive energy” and “gratitude” in the national discourse are premised in the name of love. Ahmed (2015) described a “national love” that is “bound up with how bodies inhabit the nation in relation to an ideal” (p. 133). Just like the dominant citizenship discourse in Hong Kong in Yam’s (2018) book that “encouraged a binary emotional response toward mainlanders” (p. 179), mainland China’s “positive energy” discursive emphasis also promotes a binary response. When the Wuhan political leaders requested people express their gratitude toward the Chinese Communist Party and the nation, it embodied a kind of “kitsch propaganda” (Bandurski, 2020) that highlighted heroic sentiments of sacrifice to preclude the cruel reality that people experienced under lockdown. Fang Fang called out this ill-conceived logic by arguing that it was the government who should express their gratitude toward the citizens who had to sacrifice during the lockdown to keep the pandemic under control (Mar 7, p. 234).

While I highlighted more “negative” emotions, it is important to note that she had moments of hope, even if they were crushed repeatedly. For example, the hope of reaching zero cases started on Mar 7 but didn’t actually materialize until Mar 19. It’s also important to note that for as much as she was frustrated and angry at incompetent government officials and information control, she was also confident in the government’s abilities to ultimately combat the virus.

## Discussion

### Public Pandemic Diaries Contributing to Social Justice

Fang Fang’s Wuhan diary caught international attention even as it was repeatedly deleted and attacked online in China. Performing communicative and affective labor, Fang Fang portrayed firsthand the lived experiences of people in Wuhan under the lockdown during the early outbreak of the COVID-19. By using her positionality as a civically responsible writer and taking advantage of her relative privilege, she shared insights from her friends in the medical and public

health professions about the development of the pandemic and the virus, as well as stories of people who were marginalized by the strict lockdown measures. In so doing, she revealed, recognized, and rejected the injustices befallen on the people of Wuhan, in localized ways (see Moore, Jones, & Walton, 2021), and evoked critical reflections on ways the local and national government responded to the outbreak as well as the weaknesses of the government's bureaucratic structures. By using the personal diary as a genre yet publishing it publicly, her diary contributed to the affective economy of the pandemic outbreak in China during the Wuhan lockdown, presenting the collective despair, frustration, hope, anger, a cacophony of emotions, while pushing against the emotional pedagogy of the nationalistic discourse of positive energy and gratitude.

As I discussed before, technical and professional communication scholars have increasingly recognized the values of storytelling in enacting social justice, such as in localizing injustices (Moore, Jones, & Walton, 2021) but also in shifting epistemic power back in the hands of marginalized communities (Baniya & Chen, 2021). In doing this work, interdisciplinary perspectives from rhetorical studies (Yam, 2018) and anthropology (Jackson, 2013; Shuman, 2006) can help us better unpack the power of storytelling in knowledge construction and facilitating civic actions. Fang Fang's Wuhan diary, when contextualized and recontextualized in local and global contexts, reveals that pandemic diaries can act as tactical communication to speak to the multiple domains of power to enact social justice.

In theorizing power dynamics in TPC work, Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) used Patricia Hill Collins' (2008) conceptualization of domains of power that are contextualized and relational: structural; disciplinary; hegemonic; and interpersonal. In the structural domains of power, Collins focused on how the organization of social institutions would marginalize certain groups, such as Black women. In her diary, Fang Fang identified the inadequacies and failures of the institutional responses to COVID-19 during its early stages and their roots in the bureaucratic system of the Chinese government. Closely related, the disciplinary domain for power corresponds with procedural justice that determines how individuals might participate in society. By questioning the emotional pedagogy of "positive energy," Fang Fang pushed back against the informational control of the Chinese nation state, which didn't allow people to feel and express their true suffering because of the need to submit to the hegemonic domain of power that shaped accepted narratives of the "battle against the pandemic." Finally, by amplifying individual sufferings, she illustrated how draconian and harsh quarantine techniques did not take into consideration the varying challenges faced by Wuhanese of different walks of life, especially those less privileged.

My analysis of Fang Fang's diary shows that publicized personal diaries can contribute to the collective storytelling in a social context and its affective economy, making salient the ramifications of sociocultural and political forces on individual bodies. By listening and amplifying these as antenarratives, we can better challenge the dominant, more unified linear narrative of battling a crisis. To contribute to social justice, I argue that pandemic diaries need to have the following qualities:

- Increasing access for less privileged people, especially access to information, using the writer's power and privilege
- Not only documenting one's own experiences but also amplifying others, especially those who are less privileged than the writer

- Humanizing the pandemic experiences by highlighting their affective dimensions, especially the “negative” ones, to push back against the militaristic rhetoric of “winning” the “war against the pandemic” and the blind praise of collective sacrifice

Overall, it must address the power imbalances that contributed to the oppressive experiences.

### Implications for Future Research

Above, I explained the important qualities public pandemic diaries should have in order to enact social justice, but what can TCP researchers and practitioners do to help facilitate and maximize effects of such immaterial labor? While Fang Fang shared stories of suffering of other Wuhanese people under lockdown, these were not systematically collected or presented. What we need is a combination of the immaterial labor performed by community members like Fang Fang as well as a coordinated civic network of support (Schoch-Spana et al., 2007), which we’ve seen in the form of community residents working together using social network sites to coordinate deliveries of daily essentials such as groceries and medicine. Further, we need infrastructure that can both support informational production (Hardt & Negri, 2000) of the experiential knowledge of these important civic actors to support continuous circulation and amplification of the voices so that diaries can remain public and that more diaries can be heard. This is where technical and professional communication researchers and practitioners can come in to play a role in supporting the mediating role of civic actors. For example, Fang Fang (2020) herself mentioned the importance of creating a searchable digital archive that would document testimonials of investigation of the early outbreak at the beginning of Jan 2020, creating a collective memory (p. 250). As technical communication practitioners, designing and contributing to the civic networks of support that allow communities to voice their concerns and providing effective channels of communication can enhance informational infrastructure, contributing to procedural justice (Ding, Li, & Haigler, 2015).

For future studies, more systematic and broader research on public diaries in both historical and contemporary public health crises can recover and reveal the immaterial labor they have been performing (Smalls, 2017). As my analysis of Fang Fang’s diary shows, these accounts often reveal the incongruities between official crisis communication and response strategies and people’s lived experiences. For TPC researchers who are interested in crisis communication, examinations and development of policies and strategies must happen in tandem with analysis of lived experiences and civic actions. To study how pandemic diaries can enact social justice expands Bhatia’s (2016) argument on interdiscursivity - the traditionally more private genre of the personal diary pushes its conventions so as to inform, reflect, and critique in public spaces. How might this genre interact with other crisis communication genres such as government briefs or official instructional content on websites like the CDC? In what ways can these official venues center experiential accounts in a non-reactive way, in contrast to the Chinese government (see Yang’s discussion of responsive authoritarianism on p. 217–218, 2022)? These are questions future researchers might consider.

While Fang Fang challenged and critiqued the government’s actions and even (dangerously) connected some of them to the political taboo of the Cultural Revolution, she was careful in constructing her own love for the nation by positioning herself as a loving critic, balancing a kind of “authoritarian resilience” by calling local officials to resign, as if that would solve the problem (Zhang, 2020), and lamenting the hopelessness of the CCP bureaucracy (Fang, 2020, p. 245). My analysis reveals the importance of critically examining the circulatory power of the diaries across



contexts, and taking into account the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of such texts and their genre performances.

Further, researching public diaries requires a careful consideration of the researcher's own positionalities interacting with the diarist's positionalities. As a Chinese immigrant living in the U.S. researching Fang Fang's diary, I'm moved by her bravery for continuing to speak up but also recognize her limited positionality as a middle-class, published author living in China and as someone who has benefited from its political system. Because they are framed as individual accounts, pandemic diaries like Fang Fang's can embody complex positionalities and perspectives, challenging the simplistic binary and bellicose understanding of Chinese nationalism in the West, as well as drawing global attention to the lived experiences of Chinese people living under lockdown. Thus, it both challenges domestic nationalist affective economy as well as the international discourse on Chinese people as puppets controlled by the state government.

When I was finishing the first draft of the manuscript in December 2021, China was experiencing its second biggest COVID-19 lockdown in Xi'an. When I was revising the manuscript the following spring, Shanghai, an international metropolis, had seen incredible atrocities under lockdown, with many people dying as collateral damage of the government's insistent "dynamic zeroing" policy. Once again, we've seen across social media sites stories of people searching for food, medical care, or even an exit out of Shanghai. While these are not all sustained, long forms of diary entries like Fang Fang's Wuhan diary, they are still constituting an antenarrative that pushes against the government's empty promises of victory. Combined with the widespread civic networks across neighborhoods, people are surviving in their own ways. Heeding these stories and efforts will help professional communicators and policymakers develop better and more equitable strategies and infrastructures to respond to pandemic outbreaks. But we must pay attention now to prevent future calamities, rather than reactively patching holes after the damage is done.

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## Appendix: Coding Samples

	Recognizing, revealing, rejecting, and replacing injustices	Invoking positionality, privilege, and power	Evoking affects
Direct personal experiences (including her lockdown experience and diary writing experience)	"Yesterday's post on WeChat was deleted again" (p. 113).	"Even though I am locked down at home, I continue to write and record what I am seeing" (p. 61).	"Right now everyone in this city is crying for him [Dr. Li]. And I am heartbroken" (p. 56).
Advice/information from her doctor friends (updates on the current situation in Wuhan, why, and what people should do)	"Yesterday's statistics revealed a dramatic drop in the number of new infections. . . But my doctor friend already told me that it was actually a shift in the way they calculated their statistics. . ." (p. 132).	"Today I also reached out to one of my doctor friends to get a sense of where things currently stand with the outbreak" (p. 109).	
Her own media consumption (posts she saw, articles she read)	"But what about these other patients with other chronic medical conditions here in Wuhan?" (p. 92)	"Compared to her, I've got it much easier" (p. 16).	"There are a few videos online that I can no longer bear to watch; they are just too heart-breaking."
Commentaries and reflections on the overall situation (including about her diary writing experience)	"If someone has to take the blame and resign, let's start with the secretary and director of Central Hospital" (p. 244).	"I actually had absolutely no intention of criticizing anyone during this outbreak" (p. 20).	"And now, although we are no longer living in terror and the sadness has dissipated a bit, we must face an indescribable boredom and restlessness, along with endless waiting" (p. 161).

### About the Author

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