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## Ai Yu

### ‘Fang-Fang’s diaries: an ethics of death in the time of COVID-19’

(Published 25 April 2020, *Discover Society* at <https://discoversociety.org/2020/04/25/fang-fangs-diaries-an-ethics-of-death-in-the-time-of-covid-19/> )

Aeschylus, writer of ancient Greek tragedies, once wrote: “[T]here is nothing certain in a man’s life except this, that he must lose it”. Beyond death’s inevitability, however, is there anything else we can say about it, in view of the increasing death toll of COVID-19 all over the world?

A controversial online diary of life and death in Wuhan during its lockdown period has been published by Fang Fang, a fiction writer. When **news** broke that her “Quarantine Diaries” would be **translated and published** in America and Germany, the social-media posts and coverage in China on “Fang Fang’s Diaries” became overwhelmingly hostile.

Some challenged her moral authority, charging her with seeking fame at the expense of the dead, while others saw her diary as an elegy for her home city, where the global pandemic began. As she said in **an interview**: “[I]f authors have any responsibilities in the face of disaster, the greatest of them is to bear witness”, and in her first-hand witness of the many casualties in Wuhan, she chose to “always [care] about how the weak survive great upheavals” and decided that “[T]he individuals who are left out” should be her chief concern.

In support of Fang Fang, I argue that death and dying should be considered as a way of examining morality and ethics, in terms of both individual dilemmas and social practices. I premise this argument on Deleuze’s (1968) philosophy of repetition in time. For example, when we lose our loved ones, our mourning will be repeated every time we experience the sense of loss. In quantitative terms, it is the mourning itself that is repeated again and again. However, every repetition of the ‘same’ is lived differently in terms of quality as the mourning is enacted *in situ* each time (here and now) and as the trajectories of our own lives play out over time.

The implication of this repetition is that there are inner moral qualities essentially inherent in time itself, because the time in which we live gives us the opportunity of knowing ourselves as moral beings, always capable of once more freshly considering what is the right thing to do. The time-frame thrust upon us makes our responsibility to ourselves and others all the more obvious.

Before presenting three excerpts on mourning from Fang Fang’s diary, I summarize the three dimensions that she leans towards in her representations of death: (1) the quality of deaths as individualised experiences, (2) death as an ongoing and non-definitive process; and (3) recognition of the pathos of loss. As explained, these dimensions need to be understood in light of the Deleuzian philosophy of repetition.

## The quality of death as individualised experiences

*“**If I made any numbers up**, would people not notice? ... The death toll in Wuhan is more than a thousand, and how many are mentioned in my blog? Not even a fraction! To recap, I will not disclose the names of any deceased person that the official media did not disclose. The whole family of Chang Kai, of the Hubei film studio died because of the corona virus. Today, the commemorative article written by his classmates was screened. Chang Kai’s deathbed will sounds sad, even heart-breaking. I wonder if those people think that this is causing panic again?”*

Fang Fang wrote this in response to a self-claimed ‘patriot’ who had attacked her for “fabricating panic while staying at home”. It shows clearly that Fang Fang was not interested in tracing or verifying the number of deaths in Wuhan; instead she cared most about making personal narratives count, evoking individualised experiences, including those of marginalised people or people left behind. When a nationalistic narrative of COVID-19 reduces the number of deaths to a political token and links it to a win-lose game, Fang Fang reminds us that we should never measure those individualised experiences against the size of the population. Such a measure devours and dilutes our sorrow and suffering as well as undermines our capacity to act.

The narration of mourning in Fang Fang’s online diary underlies the significance of the other and the pathos of loss. Although the instances of death in her diary betoken transience, discontinuity and fragmentation, they allow us to re-experience the individual deaths of the victims of the pandemic and, thus, help us gain access to non-chronological time in which we encounter our pure past. This shows how our experiences may resemble or echo one another, but always contain an experiential difference that renders each of them unique and special: when death intersects with different identity categories, our thoughts became calls for support or creative problem-solving for the **migrant workers in Wuhan, kids becoming orphans, or female medical workers with shaved heads**. Through this kind of repetition, our being is becoming, an eternal return in future time.

Since none of the living has ever experienced death – there is no lived experience of death within our own being – we can learn how to live only through what is the closest and the most accessible notion of death, namely, the death of the other. The hardships of learning from the death of someone else, their emotional and intellectual legacy to us, translate into new ways of recounting life and accounting for life through the constant warning given by their death: we too will die, we are dying and we may already be dead although still living (Artemenko, 2017).

## Death as an ongoing and non-definitive process

*“**I think they do have a responsibility**. This is why we are grieving and indignant over the death of Li Wenliang. After all, he spoke out first, even though he was only reminding his friends, but still he laid bare the truth. However, Li Wenliang, who told the truth, was punished and eventually lost his life. Even on his deathbed he received no apologies. With such a result, will anyone still dare to speak out in the future? People like to say that ‘silence is golden’ as a way of showing their profundity. But what is this silence? Will we be confronted with the same silence again?”*

In this excerpt, Fang Fang shows us that we can interpret the death of whistle-blower Dr. Li Wenliang as a sacrifice for the sake of the other, another kind of difference that separates our

experiences and ensures the immortality of humankind. In this sense, the philosophy of repetition over time allows for spiritual and moral improvement: when we encounter the contradiction between survival and nothingness, oscillating between forgetting and remembering, we hope to establish a genuine bond with Dr. Li Wenliang even though we feel guilty for keeping silent about his martyrdom.

Here, the Deleuzian repetition sheds new light on how love for a ‘stranger’ can be experienced through repetition and must be repeated even as death perpetuates the very process of repetition. This means that the mourning for Dr. Li Wenliang is inherent, recurrent and progressive in the sense that death is never definitive, for sorrow and remembrance still keep him alive to transfigure the living.

Indeed, after his passing, people began to gather, virtually, to read his last post on Weibo, the Chinese social media platform. In **the comments section**, they grieve and seek solace. Under this post, people have left more than 893,000 comments. Some people post a few times a day, telling him how their mornings, afternoons and evenings have gone. As the deadly virus killed tens of thousands around the world, many Chinese people chose this unique way of coping with the loss and grief by sharing their sadness, frustration and aspirations with someone who not long ago was a total stranger to them but is now their trusted, respected and loved friend.

### **Recognition of the pathos of loss**

***“A patient from Wuhan, Xiao Xianyou, passed away.** Before he died, he wrote his last words: two lines, eleven characters in total. A local newspaper used the headline: “The crooked seven-character last words that make people burst into tears” to write about him. The seven words that made the reporter cry are: “My body is donated to the country.” In fact, Xiao Xianyou’s note ends with four more words: “Where is my wife?” More people wept over these four. It was very touching to will away his body, but before his death, he was also thinking about his wife, and this fact was equally touching”.*

In this excerpt, Fang Fang retrieved the missing element of an ordinary citizen’s last words, which recognised fully the pathos of loss outweighing any nationalist tactic of emotional arousal. In China, good people doing extraordinary things under the wise and competent leadership of the government has always been a constant theme hammered home by newspapers and social media when reporting social emergency or natural disaster. Most ordinary people however experience a deep sense of their actual inability to obtain transparent and accurate information. And their anxiety and fear, despite the failure to acknowledge, are overwhelmingly real and pressing in the face of the death threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pathos of loss is closer to the mood of our time and in some ways we have found ourselves bearing it from the outset. This mood colours in advance the ways in which things can matter to us. Indeed, they are the conditions that allow any aspect of the world to matter to us (Introna, 2019). Here, the pathos of loss that predates the pandemic can be seen as an affective lens, affecting how we are affected. This is perhaps why **Professor Dai Jianye of Wuhan’s Central China Normal University** reported hearing that the government had sent hundreds of journalists to report on the epidemic area, yet “all of them together don’t match one Fang Fang.” Fang Fang’s recording of the pathos of loss shows how we affect and are

affected at the same time. Her writing has helped us to relive our experiences and thereby heal and recover from what we lose to time.

In sum, an ethics of death in the time of COVID-19 take the multiplicity of death seriously. These ethics will never ask if we will die because of the virus, how many have died, or how many deaths count as a victory. Instead it probes who, how, in what case, from which viewpoint we die. All of these questions allow us to define death as the differential ideas immanent in the intensive processes that they structure.

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