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Liu, Xin

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# Hair, machines, sanitary pads and diary: The sentimental intimacy of truth during the COVID-19 pandemic

Liu Xin 

## abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been unfolding in the age of post-truth. Named as 2016's word of the year by the *Oxford Dictionary*, post-truth is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Mcintyre 2018, p. 5). This article considers the enduring – if not intensified – feeling of and for truth in the face of the uncertainties and competing narratives of the pandemic. As I will show, this feeling of and for truth takes a specific affective expression, which I call sentimental intimacy. Zooming in on four case studies in the Chinese context – cutting or shaving off female nurses' hair, machines and workers at hospital construction sites, the shortage of sanitary pads, and the controversy over Fang Fang's diary – I argue that the sentimental intimacy of truth concerns an irreducible attachment to an imagined inside whose close/d-ness undergoes constant negotiation.

## keywords

sentimental, intimacy, truth, COVID-19 pandemic, China

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been unfolding in the age of post-truth. Named as 2016's 'word of the year' by the *Oxford Dictionary*, post-truth is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Mcintyre 2018, p. 5). Much focus has been placed on the proliferation of fake news during the pandemic that takes the form of, for example, the obfuscation of facts by

governmental officials, and the fabrication of unusual animal activities such as the appearance of dolphins in the Venetian canals, and drunk elephants in a village in China (Daly 2020). It is important to note the racialised and gendered ways in which fake news is produced and circulated (see, for example, Ringrose 2018). Jason Harsin notes that the pandemic is also an infodemic and "a set of transnational political events" (2020, p. 1060) that piggyback on "toxic White Masculinist truth-telling and truth-recognition" (p. 1065) where male rage is considered

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an indicator of authenticity and reliability. From a different perspective, Marcia Allison observes the ways in which the fake images/videos of unusual animal behaviours in urban habitats during the pandemic become a tool for ecofacism, “a far-right ideology that marries environmentalism with white supremacist ethnonationalism” (2020, p. 4.1).

This article considers the question of truth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its focus is not on how and why fake news circulates, which has been much discussed, but on the enduring – if not intensified – feeling of and for truth in the face of the uncertainties and competing narratives of the pandemic. As I will show, this feeling of and for truth takes a specific affective expression, which I call ‘sentimental intimacy’. At its core, sentimental intimacy concerns an irreducible attachment to an imagined inside – the relation of interiority – whose close/d-ness undergoes constant negotiation. Attention to the affective and inter-subjective processes that animate the question of truth thus moves beyond the narrow focus on the where and the why of authorial intentions, and the strict opposition between truth and falsehood (see, for example, Barnwell 2020). In what follows, I first explain what I mean by sentimental intimacy as the feeling of and for truth. I then turn to four case studies in the Chinese context – cutting or shaving off female nurses’ hair, machines and workers at the hospital construction sites, the shortage of sanitary pads, and the controversy over Fang Fang’s diary. The analysis draws on Chinese social media discussions and autobiographical accounts.

In an attempt to perform the sentimental intimacy and the negotiation of the close/d-ness, the analysis of these case studies deliberately moves between spaces and scales, such as the individual and the collective, the national and the global, online and offline, social media and domestic spaces, human and more-than-human. It weaves together practices of representation and interpretation and draws out the inter-subjective processes of sense making. This article ends with a vignette of a dispute between my dad and I about Fang Fang’s diary, that encapsulates the multiple spatial and affective dimensions of the sentimental intimacy of truth.

## The sentimental intimacy of truth

The question of truth is seldomly thought about through the lens of the sentimental and intimacy. In this section I explain how I approach the sentimental and the question of intimacy, and spell out the specific ways in which they are relevant for engaging with the problem of truth. Rey Chow (2007) has provided a succinct formulation of the term ‘sentimental’ that I find especially useful when analysing news coverage and discussions on Chinese social media. In her study on contemporary Chinese cinema, Chow observes the persistence of the sentimental as of an affective mode. Chow challenges the received notion of the sentimental as “characterized by an apparent emotional excess, in the form of exaggerated grief or dejection or a propensity toward shedding tears” (2007, p. 15). According to Chow, the sentimental should instead be considered “a mood of endurance”, which is about “what keeps and preserves, what holds things together” (2007, p. 18; emphasis in original). That is, sentimentality concerns “the modes of human relationships affectively rooted in the imagined inside – an inside whose depths of feeling tend to become intensified with the perceived aggressive challenges” (Chow 2007, p. 19).

Chow (2007, p. 20) outlines a few types of scenarios in which the sentimental occurs in Chinese cinema, that are informative for the analysis here:

DOMESTICITY, the household or partnership arrangement in which human interactions often assume the form of caring for loved ones’ physical well/being, including performing menial chores for them, urging them to rest and relax, and nursing them when they are sick... POVERTY, or the condition of economic deprivation and social powerlessness that sets some groups of people apart from others... THE SIGHT OR KNOWLEDGE OF THE EXERTION OF PHYSICAL LABOR, a condition associated alternately with poverty, hardship, undeserved cruelty, misfortune, and low/class or subservient status... A PREFERENCE FOR FAMILIAL/SOCIAL HARMONY AND RECONCILIATION, as opposed to family/social discord and conflict – a preference that is underwritten with demands for

self-restraint and self-sacrifice, qualities that are essential to group unity.

As the descriptions of these scenarios show, the sentimental is about “being accommodating and being accommodated, about the delineation and elaboration of a comfortable/homely interiority, replete with the implications of exclusion that such delineation and elaboration by necessity entail” (Chow 2007, p. 19). Importantly, as Chow explains, the sentimental cannot be reduced to a phenomenon in contemporary Chinese cinema, for it is a mood, a tone, in the sense that it “traverses affect, time, identity, and social mores, and whose contours tend to shift and morph under different circumstances and likely with different genres, forms and media” (2007, p. 17).

While Chow’s theorisation of the sentimental provides the analytical framework for approaching the feeling of and for truth in terms of the affective rootedness in an imagined inside, her focus is primarily on “domesticity, the household, and the home” (2007, p. 18). In engaging with other modes of intimacies and attachment through the lens of the sentimental and vice versa, I supplement Chow’s theorisation of the sentimental with Lauren Berlant’s formulation of intimacy. Berlant posits intimacy as spacing processes that generate and destabilise connections and boundaries, which I call *close/d-ness*. As I see it, *close/d-ness* captures the key aspects in intimacy – affective attachments and connections, the closure/boundary that separates an inside from its outside, normative regulations/intelligibility/taxonomic categories that organise and structure intimate spaces and practices. Importantly, Berlant configures intimacy in processual terms, thus moving beyond the “the sexual, romantic, and conjugal relations defining the liberal individual” (Eng 2010, p. 11; see also Lowe 2015).

As Berlant (1998, p. 283) asks:

How can we think about the ways attachments make people public, producing trans-personal identities and subjectivities, when those attachments come from within spaces as varied as those of domestic intimacy, state policy, and mass-mediated experiences of intensely

disruptive crises? And what have these formative encounters to do with the effects of other, less institutionalized events, which might take place on the street, on the phone, in fantasy, at work, but rarely register as anything but residue.

Berlant’s theorisation of intimacy allows for critical examination of not only the negotiation between the personal and the collective, between transgressive desire and the institutionalised normative intimacy, but also the irreducible contradiction at the heart of intimacy. That is, the *close/d-ness* of an imagined inside is as much about the desire for attachment that could be transformational and boundary breaking as it is about the demand for boundaries that are “formed around threats to the images of the world it seeks to sustain” (Berlant 1998, p. 288).

It is this sense of desire and demand for *close/d-ness* that I consider central to understanding the sentimental intimacy as the feeling of and for truth. In other words, at its core, the feeling of and for truth concerns relations – access and/or belonging to – an imagined inside of bodies, psyche, homes, communities, nations, things, and events. The gendered and racialised ways in which the interior is positioned as the location of truth that can be perfectly represented has been much criticised (see, for example, Butler 1993; Gordon 1993). My point here is not to repeat these critiques, but to ask a slightly different question, namely, how the imagined inside is affectively produced and negotiated in the feeling of and for truth.

## Hair, machines, sanitary pads and diary

On 23 January 2020, two days before the celebration of the Chinese New Year, the Chinese city of Wuhan was forced into lockdown. Over 11 million residents were put under quarantine. Face masks and social distancing became mandatory across the country. However, what shocked the people was not simply these lockdown measures, but also the censorship, misinformation and cover-ups (for example, the silencing and punishment of the doctors who warned about the virus) by a

government which has promised greater transparency since the SARS epidemic (see, for example, Huang 2003). In the face of growing public distrust, and competing narratives about COVID-19 in the global media landscape, the Chinese Government and State media constructed a narrative that depicted the virus outbreak as one of national misfortune, and China's response to COVID-19 as heroic, collective and selfless (see, for example, Xie & Zhou 2021; Liu 2020), as the news coverage of female medical workers who had their hair cut or shaved off exemplify.

### Hair

These reports often couple images of the nurses crying as their hair was shaved off with stories about the various sacrifices they had to make for working on the frontlines of the fight against COVID. The sacrifices typically concern their relationship with and responsibilities towards their family and loved ones. The account provided by the intensive care unit nurse Zhou Ya Pin in her *War on Virus Diary*, published by Jin Yang Net, a mainstream media outlet in China's Guang Dong province, is a good example.

Zhou had not cut her hair for more than 14 years. She really treasured her long hair, which made her feel feminine and brought her many joyful memories. It was also an important asset for her romantic relationship. As Zhou explained in the diary, "My boyfriend really likes me with long hair. I sometimes would even jokingly suggest him to 'marry me when my hair gets down to my waist'". Nevertheless, Zhou had to cut her hair very short as longer hair would increase chances of infection. Zhou cried during the haircut, which according to Zhou, felt like torture. Afterwards, Zhou called her boyfriend to inform him about the haircut:

After a long pause, he said, 'it is what it is.' I cried again. After a while, I asked him jokingly, 'Let's get married when my hair grows till my waist again?'<sup>1</sup>

Female medical workers like Zhou who cut or shaved off their hair have been hailed as 'the most beautiful warriors' by Chinese State media and other media outlets. They

are seen as the embodiment of the loving, heroic and caring nation. These teary images and personal stories provide *insight* into these women's relationship with their bodies, their families, and their loved ones, which make these accounts feel more truthful. The feeling of and for truth emerges through and generates new modes of connections between the medical care workers and the public, and a sense of endurance and togetherness of the nation. As Berlant (1998, pp. 284-285) notes, the connections that have an impact on people do not always attach to concrete spaces or take shape in recognizable forms:

... nations and citizens, churches and the faithful, workers at work, writers and readers, memorizers of songs, people who walk dogs or swim at the same time each day, fetishists and their objects, teachers and students, serial lovers, sport lovers, listeners to voices who explain things manageably (on the radio, at conferences, on television screens, on line, in therapy), fans and celebrities – I (or you) could go on.

In many ways, these new connections are important, especially as they make visible the work and experiences of female medical workers on the frontline. However, the intelligibility, and hence the truthfulness of such close/d-ness is shaped by and reproduces established normative notions of sentimental intimacy. For example, Zhou's account underscores the value of the long hair for her romantic relationship, so much so that she seemed worried about her boyfriend's reaction to the haircut. The long hair, seen as a key feminine trait, carries the promise of marriage. Similarly, in news coverage about female medical workers, their role as caregiver for their family and the patients is emphasised. Despite the possibilities for new connections, the feeling of and for truth often ends up reproducing the institutionalised sentimental and intimate relations, such as the domestic and the familial.

### More-than-human intimacies

Images of Wuhan under lockdown were widely circulated in both Chinese and international media outlets. The images typically depict the empty streets, the empty Huanan

market – the speculated origin of the outbreak – and barricades that created borders in the city, among residential compounds, and blocked people and vehicles. The empty streets and the barricades seemed to suggest that Wuhan was isolated and abandoned. At the same time, these images of Wuhan also came to stand for China and the Chinese people for viewers outside China. For example, the images and video footages that depict a woman eating bat soup (which was used uncritically by media outlets, even as it was quickly debunked as fake news, as it was filmed in Palau for a travel show in 2016) (Mas 2020) and the dirty and cramped conditions in which the animals were kept in the wet market, were seen as truth – because ostensibly coming from the inside, of China – of its backwardness. They were used to justify racist discrimination and violence against Chinese and other Asian bodies. In stark contrast to the emptiness and isolation depicted in these images, the mood of sentimental intimacy is foregrounded in images and videos that show families' lockdown life and construction of the field hospitals, to which I now turn.

Short videos of Wuhan people's life at home during the lockdown were uploaded by many netizens on social media platform such as Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). Many of these videos show innovative and fun activities that were invented by family members to kill time. These activities include, for example, pretending to be going on holidays in their homes, and various contests among family members, such as singing contests, dancing contests and table tennis competitions. These short home-made videos gave a glimpse into domestic and familial lives under the lockdown. They were popular on social media and received coverage from the Chinese State media. They were praised for providing "realistic" representations of "小家" ("small family", i.e. households), which mirrored the accommodating and harmonious "大家" ("big family", i.e. the Chinese party state).

The livestream of the construction of two field hospitals – Leishenshan and Huoshenshan hospital – also produced a feeling of a safe, loving and accommodating inside. The construction of Huoshenshan field hospital was commenced on 26

January 2020 and completed on 2 February 2020. It eased the shortage of hospital beds and medical supplies. Many people watched the livestream of the construction of Huoshenshan hospital. For example, it was recorded that over 70 million people were watching the livestream at the same time via CCTV's (China's State-controlled broadcaster) online streaming platform. These videos showed dozens of cranes, trucks and construction workers busy at work. The busyness and crowdedness of the construction site brought into view another side of Wuhan under lockdown. In the comments section of the livestream viewers praised the government's rapid response to the overwhelmed hospital admission capacity, and the efficiency of the construction process, and expressed their hope that the situation would soon improve.

It is interesting that although social media platforms such as YouTube are banned in China, the videos were made fully accessible on CCTV's YouTube channel, targeting viewers outside China. The videos of construction of the field hospitals provide another narrative/image of China, characterised by a hard-working morale, collective spirit, and advanced technologies, as opposed to the monstrous intimacy with non-human animals, which the bat soup-eating video was seen to attest to. It is important to note in passing that the 'visual evidence' – truth – that the bat soup video was said to provide, was widely circulated and unchallenged, so much so that it was even featured in the title of the edited volume *Sopa de Wuhan* (Wuhan soup) written by some of the most renowned critical thinkers, such as Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, and Judith Butler (see Agamben et al. 2020). The association of Wuhan, bat soup, Chinese bodies, and coronavirus lends support to the racialised construction of the animality, monstrosity and contagiousness of the Chinese.

Interestingly, the category of humanness was also reimagined in viewers' construction of a collective intimacy. For example, some of the cranes were given endearing names by the viewers, such as 小白 (Little White), 小藍 (Little Blue), and 小黃 (Little Yellow). In the comments section of the livestream on CCTV's online streaming platform, viewers posted comments such as "Little Blue has been busy all



day"; "Little Yellow is so cute"; "Little Blue you should eat".<sup>2</sup> Some viewers even identified cranes as their children. For example, one wrote "You are the best guardian of the world. Mom loves you".<sup>3</sup> Besides giving humanised identification to the cranes, viewers also addressed themselves and each other as 云监工 (cloud supervisors). For example, one viewer commented "Zhejiang cloud supervisor is here". Another viewer wrote "Xinyang cloud supervisor is here for the shift". And another viewer wrote "Jiangxi cloud supervisor is here. You guys can go eat. I will make sure that things are ok".<sup>4</sup> These endearing identifications interpellated and generated a collective 'we', including both the viewers/supervisors and the viewed/supervised machinic workers/companions/kin.

As Chow shows in the scenarios of the sentimental, the labour of care, the practices of accommodating, of making others safe and comfortable, produces an imagined inside that is shielded from the threatening outside. In the case here, the sight of the working of cranes, the anthropomorphic construction of their identities as hardworking, loyal, serving companions, as well as the self-identification of the viewers as cloud supervisors, materialise the close/dness of an imagined community that is safe and accommodating. The notion of imagined community, first put forth by Benedict Anderson (1991), has been widely adopted to examine the racialised and gendered construction of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997), as well as the participation in cosmopolitan space despite actual physical separation (Schein 2001). Here I want to draw attention to the involved relation between the subject and the object in the process of imagining the interiority of a community.

The word 'imagined' in the term imagined community indicates the processual and non-essential nature of the formation of the subjects of communities. It concerns the multiple processes of attachment "in which the subject is constituted by recognizing, in external objects, the part of herself that has been 'dismembered' for cultural and historical reasons" (Chow 2010, p. 115). In the imagined community of constructing the field hospital, the cranes are not simply nameless and faceless tools/

objects. In being named as Little Yellow, Little Blue, they embody the collective spirit of Chineseness – an ideal that was most prominent during the Maoist period and became displaced and occluded in the post-socialist era (see, for example, Farquhar 2002; Zhang 2008). Yet, although the relation between the self and the collective has undergone drastic transformations in the post-socialist era, the idea that Chineseness is expressed through selfless labour for the collective, solidarity, and filial piety to the nation/state as a harmonious family, never disappeared. As Li Zhang observes, the post-socialist reconfiguration of selfhood that emphasises self-actualisation should not be understood as "the rise of an individualistic self against a collective oriented self" (2020, p. 18).

When the boundary of the nation – its safety and self-image – is felt to be destabilised by both the virus outbreak and the global discourse that blames China for the pandemic, the collective ideal – a 'China' that never is – functions as the "tacit fantasies" and "tacit rule" (Berlant 1998, p. 287) that conditions the intelligibility of and is reproduced in the sentimental intimacy constructed by the viewers. In many ways, the viewers' commentaries could be considered as actualising an alternative, but no less real, representation of their role in the outbreak, one that is agentic, in control and involved rather than passive, helpless and isolated. In performing the role of supervisors of the construction project – taking shifts, clocking in and out – the viewers constructed a sense of continuity and a more liveable truth of the crisis. As Berlant (1998, p. 286) writes, intimacy may feel like a "controllable space" and "seem of manageable scale and pacing; at best, it makes visible the effects of one's agency, consciousness, and intention".

It follows then that the sentimental intimacy of truth also entails the bifurcation between the subject and object of animation, control and knowledge, whose effect is not neutral. As Sianne Ngai (2005, p. 101) asserts, the concept animation "takes on special weight in the case of racialized subjects, for whom objectification, exaggerated corporeality or physical pliancy, and the body-made-spectacle remain doubly freighted issues". Similarly,



Chow notes that being animated means “becoming a spectacle whose ‘aesthetic’ power increases with one’s increasing awkwardness and helplessness” (1993, p. 61). For example, it could be argued that the Chinese bodies were animated in the global mediascape, as their mask-covered faces, their eating habits, lifestyles, fear, and helplessness were zoomed in on and magnified as the spectacle and the evidence of the truth of COVID-19.

From a different perspective, the body of the cranes that moved mechanistically up and down, from one side to another, were also animated and anthropomorphised as the tireless and selfless labourer/servant/kin. Interestingly, in leading the direction and focus of the viewers’ eyes through their mechanistic movements, the cranes also animated the human viewers. Not only did they become dis/embodyed eyes – ‘cloud supervisors’, but they were also interpellated in the sense that they came to know themselves, as and through the lens of the cranes, the objects, the spectacle. As Ngai suggests:

It might be said that the excess liveliness ... suggests something like the racialized, animated subject’s ‘revenge,’ produced not by transcending the principles of mechanization from above but... by *obeying them too well* (2005, p. 117; emphasis added)

As these examples show, the feeling of and for truth is a dynamic, inter-subjective process that is conditioned by, reproduces and negotiates with relations of power. In the next section I draw out the asymmetrical relations of power and modes of exclusion that are integral to the constitution of the sentimental intimacy.

### ***The asymmetrical relations of power of the sentimental intimacy***

In so far that the sentimental intimacy constructs a close/d-ness – an unstable boundary that separates the inside and the outside – it produces forms of exclusions conditioned by asymmetrical relations of power. For example, unlike the identification with and humanisation of the machines, the construction workers were paid much less attention. In the Chinese

mainstream media outlet, the construction workers – especially those who came from outside Wuhan – were praised for their hard-working morale and altruism. However, issues such as poor working and living conditions, the lack of formal contracts, missed payments, and the lack of transparency in the hiring process (some did not even know that they were going to build the field hospitals)<sup>5</sup> were elided in these reports. Videos of construction workers confronting the management staff were never shown in the livestream.

Even when a construction worker posted a petition on Weibo (one of the most popular media platforms in China) in which they explained the various injustices and mistreatments they experienced at the construction site, the factualness of their accounts was questioned by many netizens. For example, one netizen commented “Shouldn’t you be working on the construction site right now? Where do you get time to post this?”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the construction workers were expected to work non-stop and selflessly, just like the cranes, so that the field hospitals could be ready as soon as possible. Interestingly, whereas the machines were humanised, the construction workers were dehumanised and objectified. The question of what constitutes the interior – the location of truth – of an event is a heavily invested and highly contested issue. It is also, as the following cases show, often materialised along gendered lines.

### ***“Iron girls” and a national traitor***

Since the beginning of the virus outbreak, the shortage of medical and personal protective equipment such as masks and protective gear received much attention. However, despite comprising over 90% of the healthcare workers in Wuhan, women healthcare workers’ need for sanitary products was ignored and even silenced. For example, the supervisors and superiors at the hospitals denied the requests for sanitary pads that came from netizens, activists, and healthcare workers themselves, arguing that sanitary products were not the primary concern (Zhou 2020). China’s State-controlled broadcaster deleted the part of an interview with a nurse who mentioned that she was in her menstrual

cycle.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to activist campaigns such as ‘姐妹战役安心行动’ (‘Reassurance for sisters fighting the virus’), the shortage of sanitary products quickly became a trending topic on Weibo, “attracting over 53 million views and 51,000 comments” (Zhang & Zhang 2020). Many individuals, companies and the State-run China’s Women’s Development Foundation began donating and sending sanitary products to hospitals.

Netizens criticised the continued shaming and tabooing of women’s bodies. Although gender equality discourse has been dominant since establishment of the socialist China, women’s liberation, folded into the liberation of the State, was seen to mean that “women can do what men can do” (Dai 2020, p. 213). As Zhang (2020, p. 16) notes, “women were pressed to step out of the domestic domain to ‘hold up half of the sky’ and erase their feminine attributes to become ‘iron girls’ in the new socialist order”.

The notion of women as half of the sky and the term ‘iron girls’ are still very prominent today. For example, shortly after the sanitary pads controversy, an article titled ‘火神山医院工地的“铁娘子”们’ (‘The “iron girls” at the Huoshenshan hospital construction site’) was published by *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>8</sup> The article quotes a construction worker at the Huoshenshan hospital construction site as saying: “在工地把口罩、帽子一戴，瞧那身把式，谁能分得清她是男是女啊？” (“Look at those skills. Who can tell whether the woman wearing a mask and a helmet at the construction site is a woman or man?”). The article describes the experiences of three women at the Huoshenshan construction site. These descriptions accentuate their sacrifice (for example, leaving their children at home, sleeping only 5–6 hours), as well as their care for others (for example, making sure that construction workers change masks, rest, and eat, or writing poems to boost the construction workers’ morale). The emphasis on women’s physical and emotional labour – “performing menial chores for them, urging them to rest and relax” – constructs the sentimental intimacy that is the “affect of accommodation, compromise, and settlement” (Chow 2007, p. 200).

Depiction of these women in terms of ‘iron girls’ is interestingly reminiscent of the humanisation of the machines at the construction site. Whereas the menstruating bodies attest to the materiality of labouring bodies – that too require care and maintenance – as well as the banality of bodily survival even in the most exceptional event such as COVID-19, the ‘iron girls’ whose bodies are made of iron rather than flesh and the humanised machines embody the “superhuman agency” (Chow 2007, p. 62) of the collective will, that transcends the embodied differences. In being hailed as ‘iron girls’, the women workers’ bodily specificities are subsumed in and appropriated by narratives of the dutiful daughters whose filiality – which is central to the Chinese sentimentalism – is manifested as self-sacrifice, strength, and obedience/mechanisation (see also Ding 2002). In many ways, filial piety concerns the protection of the close/d-ness of the family at all costs, even if what is considered home is uninhabitable. The Chinese saying ‘家丑不可外扬’ (‘keep the family skeleton at home’) captures this sentiment. It is important to note that domestic violence victims are often silenced by family members or authorities precisely because domestic violence is considered a form of ‘家丑’ (‘family skeleton’). As this idiom shows, what matters is not simply the family itself, but how it is presented to and interpreted by others.

The problem of family skeleton is also at the heart of the controversy around Fang Fang’s diary. Fang is a renowned author from Wuhan. At the time of the outbreak, Fang was retired, and lived alone with her dog. During the lockdown, Fang posted short diary entries on the social media platform WeChat. It was read daily by hundreds of thousands of people. I was one of the readers. The diary entry was typically posted before midnight. I remember staying up late at night, just so I could read the entry as soon as possible, because it was often quickly deleted by WeChat admins. In her diary, Fang wrote about her experiences of the outbreak, her thoughts and feelings about her encounters, rumours and news she heard from friends, neighbours and family members. The writing was easy to follow. The text was not very structured, but seemed to simply follow what came to her mind. For

example, the reader would often experience a sense of discontinuity or interruption in Fang's thinking through phrases such as "by the way". As Fang (2020, p. 63) explained in her diary:

I've grown accustomed to writing in that small 140-character window afforded one on the Weibo platform, so when I publish things online they tend to be quite informal (I always had a preference for more informal style!). I just post whatever pops into my mind. I don't spend much time editing my posts before uploading them, so there are often grammar and spelling mistakes (which is embarrassing, considering that I'm a graduate of the Wuhan University Chinese Department!).

Although the diary is supposed to be one of the most intimate genres of writing, in the sense that it zooms in on the thoughts and feelings – the interior – of the writer, Fang's posts often read as a conversation with the readers. For example, Fang would sometimes provide a rationale for her accounts, such as "The reason that I am recounting all the details is that this morning I read an interview with Mr Wang Guangfa" (Fang 2020, p. 86). Besides the details of her daily life – what she ate, her health, the medication her aging dog needed – Fang drew on her own encounters and the information she received from friends and families, which sometimes differed from or even contradicted the information provided by the mainstream media outlets, to critically reflect on the outbreak and the lockdown. Fang was also vocal about the need to remember and reflect, and above all for the officials of Hubei province to be held accountable for the silencing of the doctors, for their negligence, and for their failure to perform their duties.

The news about the publication and translation of Fang's diary by an American publisher stirred up a polarised debate in China. For the supporters, Fang's diary provided a space for collective remembering and mourning, and for understanding the outbreak beyond the narrative of war and heroism. They argue that the diary does not contain any hidden truth and therefore cannot constitute any threat to the country. Some opponents have tried to prove that

Fang's accounts distort truth. They argue that Fang was home all the time, and therefore could not have possibly known what was really happening in hospitals and in other families. Other opponents condemn Fang as, and profiting off, '家丑' ('family skeleton'). They criticise Fang for giving valuable information – the experiences from inside Wuhan during lockdown – to the West, which is said to have isolated, demonised and spread fake news about China since the start of the outbreak.

My intention here is not to provide a detailed analysis of the diary or the politics of the debate. The point is rather to show the intensely negotiated boundary-drawing practices that generate multiple and competing imaginaries of the inside. For example, it is interesting that the two kinds of criticism of Fang's diary actually contradict each other. Whereas the first criticism suggests that Fang's account is untrue, because of the lack of access to the frontline – the real inside of the outbreak, the second condemns it for its betrayal of the nation precisely because it contains information – truth – from the inside on the everyday lived realities of Wuhan. For the supporters and readers of Fang's diary, the diary and its comment section not only allowed for attachment between Fang and the readers that was especially significant during the lockdown, they also materialised a safe and intimate space for sharing feelings and discussing events that might otherwise be censored or silenced.

## Conclusion

In a way that mirrors this opinion battle about Fang's diary, my dad and I had a heated debate at the dinner table about Fang's diary. My dad grew up in the late 1950s, experienced Maoist socialism, the great famine of 1958–1961, cultural revolution, and post-socialist market reforms, and often tells me that he is in awe of China's transformation. Whenever he hears the song '我爱你中国' ('I love you, China'), which is the theme song from the film *海外赤子* (*Overseas Compatriots*), he would close his eyes, take a deep breath, and sing along. My dad does not like how China is depicted in the Western media; he feels that China and the Chinese people

have often been wronged and misunderstood. For him, the translation and publication of Fang's diary by an American publisher would contribute to the continued discrimination against and violent exclusion of the country and its people. Although I understand my dad's point of view, I quickly jumped to Fang's defence and criticised the gendered logic that informs the idea of 'keeping family skeleton at home'. At some point, both my dad and I started speaking faster and louder. It was not until my mum said "That's enough" that we returned to eating.

The sentimental intimacy speaks of and promises the comfort, safety, attachment, and close/d-ness of an imagined inside. As a mood of endurance and a structure of accommodation, it solicits forms of submissions and exclusions to solve tensions and to reconcile antagonisms and contradicting feelings of and for truth. It escalates the demand for institutionalised intimacies even, and especially when, the imagined inside is under threat. Taking cues from Chow's approach to the sentimental, my objective in this article is not simply to expose and criticise the normative assumptions and violent exclusions of the sentimental intimacy, nor to simply deconstruct representations of truth. Instead, I am invested in thinking through the feeling of and for truth, and the ways in which it creates and destabilises boundaries.

In zooming in on the case studies of hair, machines, construction workers, sanitary pads and diary, I have sought to show the affective and inter-subjective dynamic of the sense-making processes that animate questions of truth. In making visible conflicting understandings of and investments in the imagined interiority, as the location of truth, I suggest that in a time when what counts as truth is ever more politicised in deeply racialised and gendered ways, it is important and urgent to move beyond the focus on authorial intentions. It is important to ask how the feeling of and for truth endures and holds people, things and places apart and together.

## Notes

1. [http://news.ycwb.com/2020-02/14/content\\_30580369.htm](http://news.ycwb.com/2020-02/14/content_30580369.htm); last accessed 20 February 2021, my translation.

2. [https://www.sohu.com/a/369306688\\_115479](https://www.sohu.com/a/369306688_115479); last accessed 5 March 2021, my translation.
3. <https://www.zhihu.com/question/368275583>; last accessed 30 March 2021, my translation.
4. [https://www.sohu.com/a/369306688\\_115479](https://www.sohu.com/a/369306688_115479); last accessed 5 March 2021, my translation.
5. <https://www.wainao.me/wainao-reads/leishenshan-workers-09252020>; Last accessed March 3, 2021.
6. <https://matters.news/@Mrtoutu/含泪转发-恳请关注一下这些-雷神山的建筑工人-bafyreie3qjmivfwf5gkcv543qij7blp2fczkc5kdonsfgbl453qfpwrgye>; last accessed 20 March 2021, my translation.
7. <https://theinitium.com/article/20200218-opinion-female-narrative-epidemic/>; last accessed 10 March 2021, my translation.
8. <http://society.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0207/c1008-31576217.html>; last accessed 20 March 2021.

## ORCID

Liu Xin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5772-6414>

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LIU XIN is a postdoctoral fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki. She has published articles in journals such as *Feminist Review*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, *Journal of Environmental Media*, *Parallax*, *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technology*, *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*, *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, and *Media Theory Journal*. Her recent research projects are located in the intersection of environmental humanities, critical race studies, science and technology studies, social theory, digital media research, and feminist theory. Email: [xin.liu@helsinki.fi](mailto:xin.liu@helsinki.fi)