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The Republic of Amnesia: The Ritual of Mourning and The Politics of Grief in Modern China

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Abstract: Mourning, far from being a simple personal expression of grief, functions as a deeply political practice that shapes public memory and collective identity. In contemporary China, the act of mourning is not only affected by individual emotions but is also subjected to state regulation, digital censorship, and ideological control. This paper explores the political dynamics of mourning through three case studies: the suppression of mourning for the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the state-orchestrated mourning for COVID-19 victims, and the politically charged mourning of former Premier Li Keqiang. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from Giorgio Agamben's "bare life," Judith Butler's concept of "*grievability"*, and Patricia Clough's work on affective economies, this analysis probes how grief is utilised as a biopolitical tool in China's governance.

The paper argues that state-controlled mourning rituals transform grief into an instrument of political legitimacy while suppressing alternative forms of remembrance. The erasure of Tiananmen victims' memory demonstrates how certain deaths are made *ungrievable*, serving the state's effort to enforce a single historical narrative. Conversely, the COVID-19 national mourning rituals illustrate how the state can choreograph grief to solidify national unity. Similarly, the censorship of public tributes to Li Keqiang reveals how spontaneous mourning can challenge the official narrative and become politically sensitive. The study highlights how emotions circulate within controlled digital spaces, showcasing the power struggle over what can be remembered, how grief is framed, and who is granted the privilege of mourning. Ultimately, the politics of mourning in China underscores that grief is not merely about reflecting on the past but is a battleground

for shaping collective consciousness in the present.

Keywords: *Mourning politics, Collective memory, Grievability, Affect, China.*

In modern political discourse, mourning transcends the conventional understanding of a private emotional expression and emerges as a politically charged practice that structures public memory and collective identity. As exemplified in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the denial of mourning becomes an act of sovereign control, rendering certain lives unworthy of commemoration. This notion resonates strongly in contemporary China, where the state's regulation of grief reflects broader strategies of ideological governance and historical curation. Within what Louisa Lim has termed the "Republic of Amnesia," memory is not merely forgotten but actively suppressed and reconstructed to align with state narratives.

This study argues that mourning in China functions as a biopolitical mechanism through which the state authorises which lives are *grievable* and which must be consigned to oblivion. Drawing upon Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life," Judith Butler's notion of "*grievability* ," and Patricia Clough's theory of affective economies, this paper situates grief at the intersection of politics, embodiment, and emotion. These theoretical frameworks reveal how mourning is not only a reflection of historical memory but also a contested site where sovereignty negotiates legitimacy and emotional control.

Through an analysis of three case studies—the suppression of public mourning for the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, state-orchestrated national mourning for COVID-19 victims, and the politically sensitive spontaneous mourning of former Premier Li Keqiang—this paper explores how public rituals, digital censorship, and emotional management are used to define collective memory. It contends that the politics of mourning delineate who is remembered, how they are remembered, and what ideological functions such remembrance serves. This reveals that grief, far from being a private sentiment, is a medium through which the boundaries of political community are continually renegotiated.

The Political Suppression of June 4th Remembrance

On June 4, 1989, Beijing's Tiananmen Square became the site of a violent state crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, an event that remains one of the most politically sensitive and heavily censored in Chinese history. Over three decades later, public mourning for the victims remains strictly forbidden in mainland China as the state enforces collective amnesia through legal restrictions, digital erasure, and ideological control. By prohibiting acts of remembrance, the government renders the victims politically *ungrievable*, ensuring their deaths do not disrupt the state's official historical narrative of the Cultural Revolution.

Agamben's concept of the state of exception offers a critical lens through which to understand this suppression of dissent. He argues that the crowds at Tiananmen in May 1989 represented "whatever singularities" and marked "a struggle between the state and the non-state (humanity)" (Agamben 85–87)—individuals who, rather than adhering to a specific political identity, embodied universal ideals of democracy and freedom. This made them unrecognisable within the logic of the state, which operates by categorising and regulating identity. Agamben pessimistically concludes that the notion of "whatever singularities" suggests an effort to escape the categorising logic of the state. However, this escape remains constrained, as it simultaneously affirms the sanctity of bare life—life excluded from legal protection—whose fragile hopes are ultimately absorbed by the enduring mechanisms of biopolitical control. Agamben thus pessimistically concludes that where Tiananmen exists, tanks will exist, and that the spontaneous, emancipatory state of exception of the masses will inevitably be swallowed up by the state of exception of sovereign governance.

Louisa Lim's *The People's Republic of Amnesia* (2019) details how the Chinese state's deliberate erasure of the Tiananmen massacre is not just an injustice to the victims but a profound injury to the nation's moral consciousness. Without the ability to collectively mourn, Chinese society is forced into what Freud terms

melancholia—a condition where grief cannot be processed, leading to unresolved trauma (243-258). Over time, this imposed forgetting has fragmented public memory, creating generational gaps in awareness. While older dissidents continue to mourn quietly, many younger Chinese, who have grown up under state censorship, remain unaware of what transpired.

One cannot think about the events of one's past without discoursing upon them… the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate memories to each other (Halbwachs 53). This aligns with what Aleida Assmann calls *memoricide*, or the killing of the memory of persons or groups (321). This divergence in emotional memory leads to an affective rupture: for one generation, June 4 represents an unhealed wound, while for another, it is an abstract event they are expected to forget or grieve without direct experience of it.

As Judith Butler argues, mourning is not simply an act of remembering but a politically structured process that determines which lives are publicly grievable and which must be forgotten. Butler further developed the ethical foundation of *grievability* from precariousness: life should be cared for and cherished precisely because of its fragility and the inevitability of death. Therefore, *grievability* is the prerequisite for life to gain value (Butler 14). However, the cognitive framework of power construction differentiates this condition of equality of all beings, distinguishing between lives that can be mourned and those that cannot, and between those that are qualified to live and those that are not (20). The CCP's sovereignty framework defines any "counter-revolutionary" as a naked life—an innocent soul—without rights and not worthy of mourning. From this perspective, the dissent of the June 4th rally is more specific: it redeems the innocent souls driven away by sovereignty back to the human world and challenges the ban on not being able to be mourned with an insistence on what can be mourned.

Historically, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China played an important role in sustaining public mourning. The June 4 memorial events were not only commemorative but also politically charged acts of resistance. The annual candlelight vigil in Victoria Park mixed elements of

traditional Chinese funerals with Western political rallies: mourners placed floral wreaths, read out the victims' names, and lit candles in their remembrance. In front of participants ranging from tens of thousands to as many as 200,000, the host would explain the importance of not forgetting this memory, demand the release of democracy activists and other political aspirations, and regard the victims as martyrs. However, the Chinese government's crackdown on the Alliance and the subsequent banning of vigils in Hong Kong since 2020 (Sum) mark the latest phase in the state's effort to extinguish this form of collective mourning.

From these folk mourning activities, we can conclude that these martyrs were not officially recognised. In modern China, the term "martyr" has a clear definition in official policy. The Chinese government has the Regulations on the Commendation of Martyrs, which lists several criteria for the authorities to assess which deceased persons can be called "martyrs" (烈士褒揚條例). There are also many martyrs' cemeteries in China.

In contrast, the June 4th commemoration activities have never been officially recognised in China. The "martyrs" of the June 4th Incident is a title spontaneously given as a counter-narrative, asserting an alternative vision of China not defined by party-state ideology. This struggle over language and rituals demonstrates that mourning is not merely about remembrance but also about the power to define history, identity, and the future of the community.

The State's Control of Mourning Rituals and Algorithms

Halbwachs argues that individual memories are shaped and structured in the collective context. Thus, while an individual has unique personal recollections, these are intertwined with the collective memory of the social groups to which they belong (38). He also notes that "memory needs continuous feeding from collective sources and is sustained by social and moral props. Just like God needs us, so memory needs others" (34). This means that an individual's ability to remember and the content of their memories depend on the groups they belong to, such as family, community, or society at large.

The Chinese government's approach to mourning reflects this distinction. If June 4th is something the Chinese government has worked hard to cover up, on the other side of the coin, we can see that it is strongly encouraged to remember. The Chinese state has long exercised control over public mourning, determining which deaths are worthy of remembrance and shaping how grief is channelled into ideological unity. This contrast highlights the biopolitical dimensions of mourning: in some cases, grief is censored and erased; in others, it is cultivated and directed toward nationalistic ends.

On April 4, 2020, China observed state-orchestrated national mourning for COVID-19 victims, with flags lowered, air-raid sirens sounded, and a nationwide moment of silence held. However, this spectacle of grief was more than a spontaneous expression of loss; it was an engineered affective event that regulated the collective mourning experience of the public. Unlike Tiananmen's suppressed mourning, this event demonstrated the state's capacity to manufacture and direct public grief toward reinforcing national solidarity rather than questioning state accountability.

The ritualisation of mourning further transformed grief into a highly scripted performance. Lukes defines ritual as a rule-governed symbolic activity that structures collective identity and reinforces social cohesion (291). The ceremony of silence was a practical activity with a normative purpose; it was highly proceduralized and rigorously enforced. The State Council issued a proclamation the day before the silence ceremony, requesting that flags be lowered to half-mast throughout the country and at consulates abroad in tribute to the memory of the victims, and that all public entertainment activities be suspended. On the day of the mourning ceremony,

> Air-raid sirens sounded, traffic was halted, Chinese flags were lowered, and state leaders stood solemnly with heads bowed in silence. The physical posture of national leaders and the synchronised stillness of the population transformed mourning into an embodied

> political ritual. In that moment, individuals across the nation were guided into a collective emotional experience, their grief structured and directed by the state……. From 10 a.m. to 10:03 a.m., the air-raid siren sounded across the land of China. During this three-minute period, social hierarchies temporarily dissolved, and all citizens became part of a unified national body—those who experienced the pandemic and those who participated in the fight against it. (Xinhua News Agency)

The mourning space was not confined to Zhongnanhai or other official sites; it extended to every household, and every individual stood still in silence. At the national level, power holders did not simply accept historical facts; By blurring the line between personal and national loss, they shape public memory to fit an approved narrative that served their interests. The procedural flow of the mourning ceremony inherited elements of traditional Chinese mourning culture but was repurposed to serve political objectives. By structuring the mourning event as a collective practice, the state ensured that individuals engaged in grief not as private mourners but as participants in a broader, state-sanctioned emotional framework. Xi Jinping's speech at the National Commendation Conference for the Fight against COVID-19 on September 8, 2020, reinforced this narrative:

> "Over the past eight months, our Party has united and led the people of all ethnic groups across the country to fight a thrilling battle against the epidemic, endured an extremely difficult historical test, made tremendous efforts, and achieved major strategic results in the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic, creating another heroic feat in the history of human struggle against disease!" (Qiushi Theory)

By framing pandemic victims as collective heroes, the state universalised death and

redirected grief into a celebration of its national resilience. Wu Hong describes this as a Maoist rhetorical strategy in which historical reconstruction serves both memorialization and political legitimacy.

Xi Jinping's way of burying the dead is to incorporate the dead into an authoritative and correct revolutionary narrative, commemorate them as "people's heroes", and make them "immortal". In this narrative, death is universalised and praised in the name of revolution. In other words, what is commemorated here is not an individual, but a plural "people". Vivid individuals are swallowed by collective memories in the historical narrative of Mao Zedong. In the process of building monuments, the past is also reconstructed by the present. This post hoc recognition is also an effective monopolistic discourse that determines who the heroes of the past are and who can be included in the state-led commemoration represented by the monument.

The state's digital mourning ritual also inherited traditional practices, in which families wear black-and-white clothing and present white flowers as symbols of grief and respect. Thus, on the day of the ceremony, social media platforms altered their colour schemes to grayscale, user avatars turned to monochrome, and major video sites changed their homepage layouts. Beyond state-led ceremonies, the affective atmosphere of mourning was further reinforced through technological platforms in which the state exercised control over how grief was expressed. Digital platforms such as WeChat, Baidu, and Sina Weibo adopted grayscale formats, news outlets switched to solemn monochrome pages, and entertainment programs were temporarily suspended. The use of grayscale visuals, silence, and the suspension of entertainment is not just about the suppression of grief, but about controlling the embodied experience of mourning, turning it into a collective, state-sanctioned event shaped in line with the state's narrative rather than an open-ended reflection on state responsibility.

As Clough argues, mourning becomes a "sociality of a system" where affective capacities are not just individual but collective, shaped by the broader social and political environment. In the digital sphere, the state's control over

emotions, whether through algorithmic manipulation or censorship, reflects a shift from individual mourning to a controlled affective response—one moulded by the state's biopolitical and necropolitical structures (Clough 27).

Beyond symbolic censorship and digital repression, the Chinese state also regulates mourning at the level of embodied ritual. A notable example is the party's stance on *pima daixiao* (披麻戴孝)—the Confucian tradition of wearing hemp mourning garments during funerals, especially common in northern China. Internal disciplinary guidance discourages party members from participating in such rites, which are classified as *fengjian mixin* (封建迷信, feudal superstition) and viewed as incompatible with Marxist materialism. For example, a 2017 directive issued by the Dunzitang Subdistrict Office in Nanchang's Donghu District explicitly required party cadres not to set up altars in public places, not to wear mourning garments in funeral processions, scatter spirit money or, engage in musical mourning rituals on public roads ("Donghu District People's Government"). These stipulations framed traditional mourning customs as excessive and disruptive, calling for their elimination in the name of "civilised and simplified" funerals. The 2021 implementation guidelines further emphasise that such practices damage the public image of party cadres and undermine ideological unity (*Central Commission for Discipline Inspection*).

This state-driven delineation between superstition and culture is far from neutral. As Kubat explains, the CCP has selectively reappropriated "excellent traditional culture" (优秀传统文化) as a source of legitimacy and moral governance under Xi Jinping. By framing Confucian virtues and nationalist heritage as assets that promote social harmony and loyalty, the party creates a politically functional version of tradition (48-86). However, rituals that resist ideological codification, particularly those related to death, grief, and cosmology, are treated with suspicion or outright banned. This contradiction underscores the unstable boundary between *minsu* (folk custom) and *mixin* (superstition), which are not culturally defined but politically constructed and contingently deployed. In this

configuration, mourning becomes not only a spiritual or emotional act but a terrain of ideological regulation, marking the distinction between acceptable tradition and political deviance.

In contrast, neighbouring East Asian societies provide more pluralistic models for integrating traditional mourning into civic life than the West. In South Korea, ancestral rites such as *jesa* (祭祀) remain widely practised, including among state officials, without fear of political reprisal (Janelli and Janelli 102). In Japan, Buddhist-inflected *kuyō* (供養) ceremonies are incorporated into both private and national memorial rituals without being labelled as superstition (Nelson 577). These examples highlight how traditional ritual in other East Asian contexts can coexist with modern governance structures and even serve as conduits for ethical reflection. In contrast, China's selective suppression of "excessive" mourning rites reflects affective authoritarianism.

State-Controlled Grief and Public Defiance

Mourning is born of grief, and grief makes us recognise our connection to others, not just to our friends and family, but to the mutual understanding and interdependence that makes us grieve for the loss of other human beings. As Butler puts it, it is not that mourning is the goal of politics, but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence (xvii-xix).

This raises a crucial question: when public mourning is suppressed, does private mourning become a political act? The Chinese state's attempt to control who can be mourned and how grief is expressed forces remembrance into alternative spaces. Thus, the burden of memory shifts away from official narratives and into the personal, familial, digital, and transnational realms. In particular, the younger generation has adopted innovative approaches to preserve memories under censorship. One notable example is the GitHub-hosted project "*lestweforget*," which archives deleted or suppressed news related to the COVID-19 pandemic, effectively creating a decentralised repository of historical memory outside state

control (GitHub).

On the other hand, on October 27, 2023, former Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's sudden death triggered a rare wave of spontaneous public mourning. Affect does not rely solely on explicit language but also on pre-conscious, visceral responses. The candles and flowers placed for Li functioned as affective triggers: silent yet powerful expressions of suppressed grief, anger, and political frustration. People travelled to his hometown and work locations to leave flowers and messages, an outpouring of grief that echoed previous moments of politically charged mourning, while there was also a sudden surge in online public opinion, including comments about Li Keqiang's life, "*人在干，**天**在**看**，苍**天有眼*" (history has an eye on we), "*长**江黄河不能倒流***" (the Yangtze River and the Yellow River cannot be reversed), "*有**权不可任**性*" (the power cannot be arbitrary) and so on. These remarks, taken out of context (and not even necessarily in line with the original meaning), obviously have a strong political implication.

At the same time, folk eulogies have also appeared in the "some people are alive, he is already dead; some people are dead, he is still alive", and so on. Owing to the strong political demands, these words and actions have alerted the authorities in Beijing as popular sentiment has strong political connotations. The state's rapid censorship of digital mourning includes deleting posts and muting hashtags. The erasure of these mourning expressions does not simply suppress grief; it redistributes affect, ensuring it cannot coalesce into a political force.

The state's response to Li Keqiang's death mirrors its approach to other forms of unsanctioned mourning. The obituary released by Xinhua was notably brief and delayed, with state media deliberately downplaying his passing. Reports of censors swiftly removing tributes and banning songs perceived as politically sensitive, such as Fish Leong's *Sadly, It's Not You*, demonstrate how mourning is carefully managed to prevent it from becoming a site of dissent (Ma).

According to the *South China Morning Post*, the fact that Xinhua first

released news of Li Keqiang's death in a short message and then did not publish a full obituary until 10 hours later suggests that Beijing's top brass was deeply shocked and unprepared (Zheng). However, even news of Li's death failed to dominate the headlines of major news portals, with microblogs at one point deleting a related trending search on the topic. In addition, in the short obituary, Xi Jinping was repeatedly mentioned five times, four of which emphasised "comrade Xi Jinping as the core." However, this approach is relatively abnormal. The obituary of Li Peng, who died in 2019, only mentioned Jiang Zemin once. (Xinhuanet) China's major party media—including outlets like Xinhuanet—along with state and local media, tend to deliberately downplay Li Keqiang's death (Tan and McDonell). Major news websites put the news of Li Keqiang's death in an inconspicuous corner, while news reports related to Xi Jinping remained on the front page. The front page of the People's Daily that day did not even mention the news of Li Keqiang's death in a corner.

The shift from discipline to biopolitical control in a global affect economy marks the consolidation of modern state power, where the regulation of biological life becomes central to political governance. In this context, a new machinic assemblage arises from turbulence and complexity, a system in which politics transforms into a form of war. Bodies are no longer merely managed but calculated, sorted, and rendered disposable within a logic of affective governance. Within this apparatus, mourning becomes a biopolitical act, its visibility or suppression dictated by calculations of power and control. (Clough 26-27)

In *Homo Sacer,* Agamben describes how sovereign power can strip individuals of their legal and political status, reducing them to bare life—human existence that can be eliminated without consequence (100-103). Like the victims of Tiananmen, Li Keqiang's legacy was subjected to this process—his death acknowledged but depoliticised, his memory tightly controlled to prevent it from disrupting the existing order. Additionally, Agamben explains the state of exception in Roman national tragedy as a condition in which *anomie,* the lawlessness is embedded in sovereign power and must be ritualistically controlled

after death (*State of Exception* 68-69). In China, this manifests in the state's effort to contain mourning within sanctioned limits: nothing must be allowed to "happen" beyond the official script. This process ensures that even in death, figures like Li Keqiang remain subordinated to state narratives and cannot become symbols of resistance.

The Younger Generation's Struggle with Historical Memory

As a new generation enters the public sphere on a large scale, and as internet supervision and censorship continue to tighten, the question of how mourning is inherited and transformed becomes increasingly urgent. Halbwachs argues, "We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated" (46). For many young people, the demand to mourn on June 4th feels less like an organic process of remembrance and more like the imposition of inherited sorrow. It is as if they are being asked not merely to mourn the dead but to bear the emotional weight of a political legacy, they did not author. The emotional burden of this long-suppressed history is transformed into a melancholic inheritance—one that they cannot fully claim as their own, yet cannot entirely reject.

This raises several critical questions: Are individuals willing to take on the emotional structure of the survivor? Do they accept the ethical Importance of historical memory? Do they see themselves as part of an "emotional and ethical community" that connects past and present?

Rather than dismissing these questions, many younger Chinese are answering them in unexpected and powerful ways. The spontaneous protests that erupted after the Urumqi apartment fire in November 2022—known as the "White Paper Movement"—demonstrate how grief and resistance are now expressed in radically new forms. What began as mourning for lives lost in a preventable tragedy quickly transformed into a broader political awakening. Young people in cities like Shanghai, Nanjing, and Beijing gathered in silence, holding up blank sheets of paper to protest not only the strict COVID-19 lockdowns but also the state's

broader erasure of free expression. The white paper itself became a powerful affective symbol—its emptiness speaking volumes about what could not be said, what had been lost, and what could no longer be publicly mourned. In this silence, mourning and resistance became one entity.

Derrida argues that the melancholy inherent in mourning is an ethic and responsibility. He contends that melancholy (*la mélancholie*) should not be conflated with depression (*mélancholie*); rather, it can serve as the foundation for a new ethics and politics (xviii). In this light, the younger generation's hesitation to engage in conventional rituals does not reflect apathy but an attempt to reshape the ethics of mourning. Their refusal of inherited forms does not signify disconnection from memory but rather signals a desire to reconstruct how memory functions emotionally and politically in the present.

The younger generation's shift away from traditional mourning practices reflects a broader transformation in the social construction of grief. Today, mourning is shaped not only by personal loss but also by collective affect circulating through digital spaces. Young people are increasingly using memes, symbols, and coded language to reframe grief under political constraints.

For instance, on Chinese social media, the candle emoji is widely used to signal grief while avoiding censorship, as seen during tributes to Dr. Li Wenliang and Li Keqiang. At times of public outrage, such as government cover-ups or leadership deaths, the phrase "Do you hear the people sing?" from *Les Misérables* is shared to evoke solidarity and suppressed sorrow. These new forms of mourning reflect a collective effort to redefine historical memory not as something static or reverential, but as fluid, unstable, and actively resistant (Clough 28).

What emerges, then, is not generational forgetting, but generational transformation: rather than preserving grief as a fixed ritual, the younger generation reshapes it as a living, shifting force—capable of confronting state power while also affirming interdependence, vulnerability, and the irrepressible demand to remember differently.

However, these practices are ambivalent in their emotional impact. While they offer spaces for solidarity and symbolic catharsis, they often fall short of providing lasting emotional resolution. The persistent need for encryption, irony, and fragmentation can deepen a sense of helplessness, leaving grief suspended rather than healed. Moreover, the ephemeral and decentralised nature of these expressions risks dispersing collective memory rather than consolidating it.

At the same time, the Chinese state actively works to fragment and neutralise these counter-practices. From digital censorship of emojis and memes to arrests of offline mourners, the state's response reveals a biopolitical imperative to control not only bodies but emotions. Mourning that deviates from official scripts is not simply erased—it is recalibrated, absorbed, or punished. The power to grieve thus becomes a frontier of sovereignty itself: a space where memory, identity, and legitimacy are contested.

Yet even within this architecture of affective control, grief remains an irreducible ethical force. As Butler emphasises, our capacity to grieve is what allows us to resist violence and affirm the value of life (21–23). In this contested field, the younger generation's reappropriation of mourning offers both a potent form of resistance and a fragile site of vulnerability. It demonstrates that grief can be mobilised not only to affirm personal loss but also to challenge historical silence and political exclusion. However, this grief is neither safe nor unbounded; it is continually surveiled, contained, and exposed to exhaustion. To mourn differently is not only to remember differently, but also to inhabit a space where affect becomes political, and where the struggle for memory becomes inseparable from the struggle for the future.

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