

A prolonged journey

Mourning and digital resurrection in the Chinese context¹

Un viaje prolongado

Luto y resurrección digital en el contexto chino

Uma jornada prolongada

Luto e ressurreição digital no contexto chinês

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the role of AI-driven digital technologies in the *re-socialization* of the deceased. Drawing on the concept of mediational performance (Bauman, 2004) as a key feature of vernacular authority, we explore how digital resurrection through chatbots and avatars mediates the relationship between the living and afterlife by re-socializing the departed. The advent of digital technologies introduces a paradigm shift, as the AI avatars replicate the deceased's social roles, generating an uncanny presence that re-enchants mourning rituals. This re-enchantment is predicated on the sacrifice of the *visage* (the social role of the deceased person) ultimately producing the illusion of an authentic *face*. Such agency enables a digital resurrection of the deceased that, while providing an illusion of continuity, threatens the fluidity of cultural memory. In turn, this process shapes the dynamic interplay between past and present through algorithmic simulation, prompting a critical re-evaluation of how vernacular authority is constructed and legitimized.

KEYWORDS: *mourning, digital resurrection, China, re-socialization, face, visage.*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of mourning practices within the Chinese context, emphasizing

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la evolución de las dinámicas de las prácticas de duelo en el contexto chino, enfatizando

¹ For coherence and readability of the text, when it comes to translations from Chinese, the English translation is given in the main text, and its original text is in the parenthesis, followed by its pronunciation in square brackets. For example, Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋節 [Zhōng qiū jié]). Chinese names are spelt in *pinyin* without intonations. If it is a longer sentence in Chinese, translation is in the main text and original text is provided in the footnotes. If not specified, all the translations from Chinese contents in this text are made by the authors.

el papel de las tecnologías digitales impulsadas por inteligencia artificial (IA) en la resocialización de los fallecidos. Basándonos en el concepto de *rendimiento mediacional* (Bauman, 2004) como una característica fundamental de la autoridad vernácula, exploramos cómo la resurrección digital a través de *chatbots* y avatares media la relación entre los vivos y el más allá al resocializar a los fallecidos. La llegada de estas tecnologías introduce un cambio paradigmático, ya que los avatares impulsados por IA replican los roles sociales del difunto, generando una presencia inquietante que reencanta los rituales de duelo. Este reencanto se fundamenta en el sacrificio del rostro social (el rol del fallecido), produciendo finalmente la ilusión de una cara auténtica. La mencionada agencia posibilita una resurrección digital del individuo fallecido que, aunque genera una ilusión de continuidad, plantea riesgos para la integridad y fluidez de la memoria cultural. Este proceso interviene en la interacción dinámica entre pasado y presente mediante simulaciones algorítmicas, lo que impulsa una reevaluación crítica acerca de los mecanismos mediante los cuales se construye y legitima la autoridad vernacular.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *luto, resurrección digital, China, re-socialización, rostro, cara.*

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa as dinâmicas em evolução das práticas de luto no contexto chinês, enfatizando o papel das tecnologias digitais impulsionadas por (AI) na re-socialização dos falecidos. Baseando-se no conceito de desempenho mediacional (Bauman, 2004) como uma característica fundamental da autoridade vernacular, investigamos de que maneira a ressurreição digital por meio de chat-bots e avatares media a relação entre os vivos e o além-vida ao resocializar os falecidos. De fato, o advento das tecnologias digitais introduz uma mudança de paradigma, à medida que os avatares de IA imitam os papéis sociais dos falecidos, criando uma presença estranha que reencanta os rituais de luto. Esse reencantamento está fundamentado no sacrifício do semblante (o papel social da pessoa falecida), criando, em última análise, a ilusão de um rosto autêntico. A agência facilita uma ressurreição digital dos falecidos, que, embora forneça uma ilusão de continuidade, representa um risco significativo para a fluidez da memória cultural. Esse processo influencia a interação dinâmica entre passado e presente através da simulação algorítmica, levando assim a uma reevaluation crítica sobre como a autoridade vernacular é construída e legitimada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: *luto, ressurreição digital, China, re-socialização, face, aparência.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Xunzi, a prominent Confucianist philosopher during the Era of Warring States, commented on the relationship between life and death: “Birth is the beginning of man, and death his end. Whilst both the beginning and end are good, the Course of Men is over”². His view reflects one of the fundamentals of how Chinese people see death and its relationship with living, that death is a natural part of the life span (Hsu, O’Connor, & Lee, 2009). From this perspective, death is not an interruption but the fulfillment of a natural cycle—an inevitable return to a cosmic order—. Life and death form a continuous yet bounded process that cycles continuously in the *Karma* of all living beings, which can be traced back to the cosmological views in Chinese culture as an intersection of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The world inhabited by humans³ is part of a bigger cosmos, which is an impersonal entity that transcends time and space⁴. In this sense, the end of the Course of Men only marks the beginning of other forms of existence, yet the deceased are still in *this* broader realm that encompasses past and present, the living and the dead. A *good death* (Fu & Glasdam, 2022), therefore, represents not simply a painless and worry-free state at the time of death, but also a fulfillment of one’s destined path in the world of the living.

These beliefs about the world beyond mortal reach are undoubtedly reflected in ritualistic mourning practices when relatives pass away. In childhood, almost every child in China is told that the deceased “travel to a place far away”, which corresponds to the otherworld discourses previously discussed. Moreover, in traditional Chinese funeral practices, it has been customary for family members and close associates to address the deceased during rituals, often communicating as if they were still present in some other forms. Memorial portraits, typically displayed within homes or ancestral halls, serve as central media for such communication; relatives may convey their sorrow, update the departed on familial developments, or seek blessings and guidance. This practice embodies a deeply rooted belief that the spirits of the deceased remain active participants in the lives of the living. The act of communicating with the deceased has historically constituted a vital component of religious and spiritual practices, prominently manifested through rituals such as ancestor

2 生、人之始也，死、人之終也，終始俱善，人道畢矣。From *On Rituals* (禮論 [Lǐ lùn]), 17. Cited from: <https://cext.org/xunzi/tian-lun/zh>

3 In some contexts, the bigger world is called “界” [jiè], meaning “the realm(s)”, or “道” [dào], meaning “the course(s)” or “the way”. The Course of Men is one of them. For example, in Buddhism, there are six realms in total, called “Ṣaṅgati” (षट्गति) in Sanskrit. The six worlds are of gods and celestial beings, of demigods, of human beings, of animals, of hungry ghosts, and of hell respectively. As we shall see later, the vernacular practices are not strictly complying with the teachings of these religions; but these ideas sporadically infiltrate into mourning practices in the Chinese context.

4 For example, again in Xunzi’s words, “天行有常，不為堯存，不為桀亡” from *On Heavens* (天論 [Tiān lùn]), 1. (“The heavens run in their due course. They do not exist for Yáo [note from the authors: a sagacious ruler in Chinese myths]; nor do they perish for Jié [not from the authors: a fatuous ruler in Chinese myths]”). Cited from: <https://cext.org/xunzi/tian-lun/zh>

worship and during significant occasions like the Tomb Sweeping Festival (清明節 [Qíng míng jié]). These traditions underscore the importance of maintaining connections between the living and their ancestors through acts of reverence, prayer, and commemoration. This relationship extends beyond mere remembrance; it is intended to ensure the continued welfare and guidance of deceased ancestors in the lives of their descendants. Such interactions are frequently facilitated through symbolic actions—such as offering tributes at ancestral altars or invoking spirits within ritualistic frameworks. Another significant cultural practice in Chinese tradition related to honoring the deceased is the tradition surrounding the “Ghost Month” (鬼月 [Guǐ yuè]), which takes place during the seventh month of the lunar calendar, typically falling in August. This period is marked by the opening of the Gate of the Underworld on the 15th day of the seventh month, a day known as the Hungry Ghost Festival (中元節 [Zhōng yuán jié]). According to Chinese folklore, during this month, the Gate of the Underworld is open, allowing these wandering spirits to roam freely on Earth. They are believed to seek food, offerings, and attention. And it is essential for families to offer food, burn incense, and perform rituals to ensure their ancestors’ well-being in the afterlife. Therefore, mourning rituals, from elaborate funeral ceremonies to long-term ancestral veneration, serve not only to express grief but to maintain cosmic and social harmony.

In this sense, the afterlife, when the Course of Men is due, also holds its promise to the relatives of the deceased: Since the world of living beings is paralleled with other worlds, under certain circumstances, it is also possible for these worlds to intersect. In *Song of Everlasting Regret* (長恨歌 [Cháng hèn gē]) by Bai Juyi (772-846AD), when the emperor lost his favorite concubine, Yang, he was able to send her a message with the help of a sorcerer and receive her hairpin as the emblem of their love. Of course, we are not here to judge the truthfulness of the story or to determine whether such transcendental communication is possible; our concern here is the understanding of the relationship between life and the afterlife. They are entwined through remembrance, duty, and the sacred passage of time. Moreover, apart from the possibility promised by the understanding of the afterlife, we can also detect how vernacular authorities function here. The possibility of the exchange between the living world and other worlds is realized by those who possess magical power, a sorcerer in Bai’s poem, and in both of the festivals discussed above, the authority is constructed through specific dates and shared beliefs. As we shall see later, authorities as such are “a product of mediational performances, involving the replication of a prior discourse” (Valk, 2022, p. 15). In this vein, the authority construction in mourning practices and its mediational status between life and the afterlife deserves further investigation.

The introduction of generative artificial intelligence (Gen-AI) transforms this vernacular practice into a new context. By offering new forms of

interaction and remembrance, these technologies are transforming long-standing traditions, including the way people process grief and engage with death. Companies such as Super Brain and ILU have developed services that enable clients to generate artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots based on the digital traces of the deceased, such as emails, photos, and social media posts. As such, AI systems—including deepfake technologies and AI-driven chatbots—are now capable of simulating conversations with the deceased by leveraging their digital footprints: dialogues, social media interactions, images, and even audio recordings. These avatars, which can mimic the deceased's personality and communication style, provide emotional support for grieving individuals, offering a form of closure or ongoing connection. Through these rituals, AIs grapple with the metaphysical implications of a posthumous existence, opening concerns about the possibility of transcending their own obsolescence beyond a programmed lifetime.

The practice has become even more popular after the outburst of COVID-19 in China. During the lockdown, many people had to undertake the bereavement of their loved ones without even bidding a proper farewell, since the funeral parlors were closed due to the quarantine. Such transformations have facilitated a reconfiguration of traditional rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960) for individuals engaging in online environments, thereby establishing an alternative liminal space that assists in navigating both the immediate and often unbearable realities of loss, while simultaneously providing a comforting virtual realm.

This transformation encompasses not only technological advancements but also significant cultural implications; it elicits profound inquiries into the nature of communication with the deceased, scrutinizing the authenticity embedded within such interactions. Additionally, it reveals specific idiosyncratic effects of AI on local cultures, often referencing age-old beliefs and rituals where ancestral veneration and continuous dialogue with the departed have historically constituted vital practices. From a broader perspective, this emergent mode of dialogue between the living and departed signifies a contemporary evolution of ancient customs that integrates cultural reverence for ancestor worship with expansive potentialities of technological innovation. The tradition of engaging in communication with the deceased within Chinese culture possesses profound historical significance, intricately linked to the principles of ancestor veneration, filial piety, and the enduring presence of beloved individuals beyond death. Therefore, after investigating the construction of vernacular authority in mourning practices, its transformation in the digital age, especially along with the rise of Gen-AI, is our next topic for discussion. In elaborating on how the avatars, or the “digital camouflage” (Gramigna, 2024), are developed from the texts of the deceased, discussions will hinge on questions of human agency and the interactions between the avatars and their users.

Following this perspective, the dialogue has trespassed into the realm that used to be authorized and dictated by previous vernacular authorities and has developed new ones in mediating the supernatural encountering by re-enchanting mourning practices in AI-generated content (Sherlock, 2013).

The practice of digital resurrection is emerging as a significant commercial enterprise within China. If people search for related topics on *Bilibili*, they are likely to encounter an advertisement titled “When photos of grandma started to move, my mom burst into tears”⁵. It navigates users to an AI-powered application called ChatGLM, developed by researchers from Tsinghua University⁶. It has already become an industry; on Taobao, the mainstream online shopping platform on which people can also pay for services, the search for digital resurrection amounts to more than 1,000 results, varying from teaching others how to resurrect their loved ones with AI tools to providing interactive chatbots based on the photos and audio recordings of the deceased. Apart from merely dismissing them, as comments from CCTV⁷, the official spokesperson of the Chinese government, as a shallow, superficial replica of human beings and that we should be vigilant of misuse, we can excavate more from the transformation empowered by AI, both from the microscope, in terms of the dialectics between the living and the dead, and from the macroscope, to investigate the shift in authoritative construction of mourning practices in general. Based on a Chinese context, this text aims to provide an investigation into digital resurrection from a semiotic perspective, delving into the intricacies of such practices and seeking to construct a theoretical understanding of the transformation empowered and entrenched by Gen-AI, which opens up further discussions on the relationship between life and afterlife in our modern times.

Scholars have increasingly focused on how religious communication occurs within the digital space, including the hybridization of digital religion, where traditional religious authorities and everyday social media users alike contribute to religious discourse (for example, Henrickson, 2023; Rodríguez Reséndiz & Rodríguez Reséndiz, 2024), among which there are studies based on a Chinese context (Khiun, 2016; Tu, 2022; Cheng, 2025), including both celebrities such as Chairman Mao and ordinary individuals. Although concerns regarding the role of algorithms in determining the visibility and success of religious content have been explored, what happens to religious authority within AI environments has not yet. This lack has not gone completely unnoticed, however; scholars have highlighted authority as an important area for exploration in studies of religion and AI, presenting an intriguing and complex challenge to traditional concepts of spiritual guidance, authenticity, and

5 外婆照片动起来这一刻,我看到妈妈哭红了眼眶。 Cited from: https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1gbfbYXEq/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=652e9c11d62a7f39355763baafb9512d

6 See: <https://chatglm.cn/>

7 See: <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/03/21/VIDEjfe23Au8Hlr8dRvTEytf240321.shtml?spm=C45404.PIDLNeJPukaY.EgpjoyaHbgld.23>

loss. For instance, Dawson's early work (2000) highlights religious "control and authority" as areas of special concern, thus raising important questions about the evolving role of technology in mediating the sacred and the nature of the spiritual experience taking place within this context. In line with this logic, Prewitt and Accardi (2023) conceptualize the term "cultural necromancy" in the context of digital culture and argue that hegemonic incorporation in the digital space will ultimately manipulate the physical figure of human beings in the service of power. However, from the bottom-up side of authority, the rise of Gen-AI also continuously changes the discourses at the top, subconsciously shifting practices in the social sphere by infiltrating different aspects of people's daily lives, which is precisely the starting point of our discussion. But first things first, there needs to be a theoretical understanding of how vernacular authorities manifest themselves in people's daily practices.

2. MOURNING AS A RITUALISTIC BEHAVIOR AND RESOCIALIZATION OF THE DEAD

Mourning is not simply a private remembrance of the dead; it is more of a performance that can be projected into the social sphere, which is inevitably entangled in the network of meaning-making. Even the most personal, private mourning has a social meaning: As Nugent (2013) argues, these mourning practices represent a trace that can be followed to both remember the deceased person and, more importantly, to construct a multi-layered identification of the selves of the practitioners in the places they dwell. Following this perspective, mourning is constantly engaged with the socio-cultural backgrounds of practice, and it is always a performance of socialization, a ritualistic behavior that consolidates individuals participating in the performance, including both the living and the dead, and is not based on a personal whim. It is constituted by a series of texts that are "crafted, bounded, internally cohesive and coherent stretch of discourse" (Bauman, 2008, p. 30) as well as a repetition of the knowledge that social groups hold, referring to the cultural memory of the collective (Assmann, 2008). Our concern here, however, is the other side of this repetition: since the knowledge of mourning practices is constantly repeated in the present, the participative culture (Lachmann, 2008) of mourning practices also introduces dynamics in the ritualistic behavior under the prescription of certain authorities. Mourning rituals are not static; they are performed, repeated, and reshaped through commemorations, anniversaries, and re-readings. Mourning rituals rely on culturally specific, yet locally adapted, textual expressions, and authority is therefore constructed, not a univocal one as politically constructed in the social sphere, but a vernacular one that "does not refer to a definite kind of religious act or a univocal expression but to relationality and openness to other lived forms of expression, knowledge and authority" (Valk, 2022, p. 2).

As we can observe from all the examples that we drew upon above, the current mourning practices are always a repetition of what has been done before, a repetition of the preceding texts that have been iterated and practiced (in the widest definition of texts, as Lotman (1988) conceptualized). From repetition, we can find a submission of the practitioners to the existing texts in the social sphere on what is considered to be a “proper” mourning practice. As Kang and Yu (2022) underscore:

In the meanwhile, however, the repetitive nature of ritual is often coupled with a covert suppressive force, a kind of symbolic pressure on the individuals, who, by osmosis, lose their individuality and accept the “will” of the community which would appear overtly mandated or even coercive in a non-ritual context. This symbolic pressure may sometimes be so excessive that it may be called the tyranny of ritual symbols, especially when the symbols are not expected to be interpreted, but only followed. (p. 168)

In this vein, the rituals that repeat the performance are mediational and register their meanings in the social sphere. Repetition of rituals mediates between the current need for mourning and the collective knowledge on how to properly construct the link with the bereft. Therefore, mourning is a collection of “speech routines organized around the relay by a mediator of at least one utterance from a source to an ultimate targeted receiver, with the relayed message framed and understood by the participants as a replication of the original” (Bauman, 2004, p. 129). Since the mourned are definitely not able to be summoned in a *séance* to give feedback and give thumbs in a mourning practice to whomever is doing a good job, the mourners find the “proper” mourning practice by repeating the preceding texts in the social sphere. “The mediator in this process takes a lower position if compared with the source of the text, which is attributed to somebody whose position excels ‘on the basis of social rank, artistic skill, spiritual power, or political power’” (Valk, 2022, p. 15). In this way, mourners construct meaning in the locality, in our case here the inner circle of the deceased person, and mourning, via anchoring its meanings in the social sphere as a mediational performance, constitute vernacular beliefs that constitute religions that are lived, interpreted, and practiced by individuals within their specific social and cultural contexts (Primiano, 1995).

If we come back to the Chinese examples of mourning the dead, we can find the diversity of various mourning practices across different places and different epochs⁸, yet also a similar mediational status between life and the afterlife. More importantly, since mourning texts are repeated in the present, we can foresee their future repetition, when such ritualistic behavior has become part of the vernacular, which indicates that these practices can become

⁸ For more examples of regional differences of mourning in China, see Shuang (1993) and Chow (2017).

routinized, traditionalized, and socialized. Authority is therefore constructed in the socialization process of vernacular practices. Building on this, the reiteration of mourning texts not only maintains a connection between past, present, and future practices but also embeds them within a semiotic framework of meaning-making. The repetition of these texts, whether in the form of oral recitations, written elegies, or digital inscriptions, reinforces their legitimacy and establishes a vernacular authority that is collectively recognized. Through their constant repetition in the present, mourning as a vernacular practice becomes deeply embedded in a semiotic system where meaning is both constructed and negotiated. The traditions of mourning on what is considered a “proper” way of paying tribute to the dead find their legitimacy in the vernacular authority, which are “a central way tradition functions discursively” (Howard, 2013, p. 76).

Moreover, we should never forget that all the mourning practices depend on the deceased, an absent but necessary figure in these ritualistic behaviors. In all the Chinese examples that we draw upon in the introductory section, we can find the attempt to resocialize the dead after an abrupt interruption marked by death (Wang & Jin, 2024) as the essence of mourning. As Song (2022) argues in the case of mourning Dr. Li as the whistleblower of COVID-19, mourning is a call addressed to the mourned for which an answer is not expected (otherwise it would be a horror movie). The outcome of this unilateral communication is that the deceased is brought back into the dialog *as if* it were a real dialogue between the living. If we take what we have just discussed on vernacular authority into consideration, we can find that the resocialization process is mediated by such authorities, translating the previous face-to-face communication into a performative utterance that constructs the social bodies of the deceased. In other words, the faces of the dead become solely social organs (Viola, 2024), or the *visage*. The deceased are made present in the social world not through their material body but through stories, inscriptions, and performative gestures. Mourning, in this sense, does not reconstruct the face of the deceased but instead constructs a *visage* that is meaningful within the social and cultural system. Therefore, when mourners resocialize the bereft back to the social sphere via mourning, the faces of the dead become secondary, whereas the *visages* are foregrounded as the essential element of mourning in a Chinese context. To put it briefly, death, first of all, marks the absence of face and the disappearance of *visage*. Then mourners gather together to reconstruct the social link with the dead and resurrect the *visage*, whereas the faces of the dead are backgrounded, which is represented in Chinese taboos about death (Yick & Gupta, 2002; Xu, 2007; Wang et al., 2023), explicitly avoiding the materiality of the dead body.

3. AN ALTERNATIVELY MEDIATED AUTHORITY

Considering the vernacular essence of the practice, the resocialization process as the core of mourning may be reduced to a very concise form. As Bauman underscores, “certain of these mediational performances represent formalized, routinized ways of foregrounding the metadiscursive practices and processes that are minimally necessary for traditionalization to be achieved” (Bauman 2004, p. 147). And further, the current repetition constantly shapes the ritualistic behaviors and adapts to new socio-cultural contexts in order to use available texts here and now in the name of tradition. Bauman (2004) further notes:

By the conventionalization of the mediational structure of the routines, the source utterance anticipates repetition – detachment from the source dialogue, the source speaker, the context and circumstances of production, and recontextualization in the target dialogue. Moreover, the shaping of the source utterance prepares it for this decontextualization and recontextualization. (p. 147)

From this perspective, the adaptation to socio-cultural contexts engenders a diverse array of mourning practices while concurrently upholding the essential principle of *re-socialization*. This phenomenon is particularly salient in the digital era, especially with the advent of AI-driven reconstructions of human likenesses, as re-socialization throughout the life course is significantly influenced by age norms and *time-related rules and regulations* (Setterson Jr., 2002). In other words, at each pivotal stage in life, as individuals disengage from previous roles and assume new ones, various institutions or circumstances intervene, necessitating a reevaluation of one’s “self-concept”; that is, the manner in which individuals define and situate themselves within the overarching fabric of society. The legitimacy of this process is typically established through formal initiation; a ritual that marks the transition within the life cycle from a prior status to a subsequent one. Notably, Schechner posits that rituals function as “short-circuit solutions to impossible problems” (2022, p. 40), which can be addressed through the performance of swift, repetitive actions. This viewpoint evokes a shift from biological existence to a digital afterlife, positing that a *ritualistic transformation* is pivotal in the process of re-socialization of the deceased, thus fostering new practices of reestablishing “personhood” within a post-mortal society. Stewart Hoover (2016) posits that media play a significant role in legitimizing authority: under specific conditions, they possess the capacity to confer authenticity and credibility upon certain practices through the processes of information production, distribution, and imagination. In a similar stance, Arthur Cowan articulates that Internet-based rituals occur within the “imagination of participants” (2005, p. 138), which also constitutes a system of legitimation achieved through social performance.

The distinctive components underlying this *mediating process* may be examined through the discursivity inherent in digital textualities, which legitimize ideological expressions grounded in ancient mythologies and values to reaffirm and formulate new ways of engaging socially. In this context, the digital media harnesses the collective wisdom of participants to conceptualize vernacular strategies aimed at reinstating decision-making authority to “we the people”. In other words, users, through their collaboration in the creation and dissemination of digital rituals, establish hierarchies of performance that prioritize specific forms of interaction, thereby fostering an environment conducive to the emergence of new forms of vernacular authority. Consequently, the digital era engenders new opportunities for both the networked propagation of vernacular practices and the meta-discursive interactions associated with these practices. This dynamic results in a diverse array of vernacular activities becoming increasingly mediated and visible. Thus, the technological affordances inherent to the digital age fundamentally extend how vernacular practices circulate and evolve.

“Technologically speaking, digital immortality is on the horizon, allowing individuals to possess a virtual counterpart”, asserts Zhang Zewei, co-founder of the AI enterprise *Super Brain*, an IA startup based in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. In constructing avatars of deceased individuals, Zhang notes that his company has assisted more than 100 clients in creating virtual representations based on their digital footprints, including emails, photographs, and social media content, with costs varying from several thousand yuan to 10,000 yuan (approximately \$1,390). According to Zhang, with adequate data input, the AI chatbot can assimilate the cognitive patterns of the individual it emulates, suggesting that technology may offer solutions to humanity’s enduring pursuit of immortality: “I recognized a market demand; technology serves as a conduit between life and death that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries”, he elaborates. “For individuals unprepared to confront death directly, technology can mitigate prolonged grief and facilitate closure” (Zhang in Wang Qian, 2024). This example revisits semiotic theory, positing that “the fundamental principle of language dictates that what remains unarticulated is rendered unacknowledged” (Hebdige in Gelder, 2005, p. 289).

A semiotic-discursive resource that can contribute to the construction and perception of vernacular authority is *manipulation*, defined as “the management of the socio-communicative context to induce a specific interpretation in another party” (Fabbri & Marcarino, 2020, p. 23). Fabbri (2020) highlights the pivotal role of manipulation in discourse, especially in the construction of legitimacy and authority. In this context, the perception of varying degrees of *truth* can be conceptualized as a process of *modulation*; an intentional adjustment aimed at influencing levels of adherence and identification. This modulation operates by cognitively and emotionally engaging individuals’ motivations in

accordance with specific communicative and ritualistic goals. Moreover, for deceased individuals to undergo re-socialization and regain social recognition their presence must be meticulously constructed to appear both prominent and highly visible. Within this theoretical framework, the social reconstruction of the deceased's image is integral to the re-socialization process. Such reconstruction transcends a mere restoration to a previous state; rather, it reconfigures their social presence, facilitating their reintegration (re-socialization) into the social fabric in a *mediated* and *representational* form.

As Bauman (2004) suggests, the rituals of mourning, while adapting to evolving sociocultural contexts, maintain a core function: the recontextualization of the deceased within a new social framework. As such, AI-driven reconstructions offer an illusion of presence by reproducing not only the deceased's physical likeness but their social function as well, thereby generating an "artificial" semblance of agency. In this context, AI does not simply simulate the deceased's *face* but constructs a new social persona (a new visage). While this newly constructed "face" lacks inherent authenticity, it is nonetheless perceived as such, owing to the sustained performance of the deceased's social role. The illusion of agency becomes crucial here: AI imbues the deceased with apparent autonomy, allowing these digital avatars to "act" and "respond" in ways that mirror the behaviors and roles they previously held. The visage, understood as a social construct, thus becomes the *medium* through which the illusion of face is projected, socially performed, and continually sustained. What may be perceived as agency is, in fact, a deliberately constructed façade intended to simulate proximity and continuity. This illusion is maintained not solely through memory but via a technologically mediated simulation that obscures the boundary between reality and representation. This phenomenon illustrates that the visage of the deceased, once a definitive indicator of individual identity, has transformed into a flexible and mediated construct, anchoring vernacular authority within ritualistic repetition. Consequently, the *sacrifice* of the "face" functions as the very mechanism through which the illusion of authenticity is sustained, allowing the deceased to persist in a form that is simultaneously socially constructed and technologically mediated.

The manipulation process concurrently engenders a degree of cooperation that transcends mere physical or symbolic coercion. In this context, rhetorical value is articulated in terms of trust and proximity, which are not necessarily bound by strict logical reasoning but function within an emotional-instrumental paradigm that amplifies perlocutionary effects (Austin, 1962) aimed at eliciting compassion or empathy. Moreover, Fabbri (2018) contends that a critical element in the efficacy of manipulation involves elucidating the context in which rhetorical-argumentative imposition occurs.

However, regardless of the extent to which it can emulate human behavior, it is evident that AI is inherently incapable of supplanting an actual person, as

noted by Zhang from Super Brain. In fact, prior to delivering such services, his team engages in a preliminary discussion with clients to ascertain their intentions and the nature of their relationships with the individuals they wish to simulate and aim to communicate with. Subsequently, Zhang's team evaluates whether the client possesses the psychological readiness necessary to benefit from the service.

There was a mother who contacted me to 'clone' her daughter. She has tried to commit suicide several times after losing her dearest. On the phone, she couldn't stop crying. After consulting a professional psychologist, we rejected her, because in her case, AI technology may harm her grieving process. (Zhang in Wang Qian, 2024)

Within this framework, manipulation transcends mere control over power and knowledge; it encompasses communicative processes pertaining to will, duty, belief, and trust; fundamental components that foster a *disposition* and sense of commitment among interlocutors. This expanded conceptualization underscores a notable transformation: the potential decline of traditional death rituals, even within symbolically rich traditions such as the Chinese one, indicates an imperative for an *habit-change* (whether rearticulated in secular or sacred terms). Such a transformation, however, prompts a reflection on long-standing behavioral patterns that have historically reemerged over time.

In his 1911 manuscript, Charles Sanders Peirce (1935) illustrates how, within the first five years of life, children begin to translate dynamic belief structures into embodied habits of action (Peirce in West, 2019, p. 1). These habits are not simple repetitions but reflect cognitive structures that guide behavioral change and act as catalysts for the emergence of new meanings (*interpretants*) within sign-object relations. As Donna West (2019) observes, these evolving belief structures can give rise to new explanatory frameworks:

Habit-change can consist in intangible implicit conduct which intimates the emergence of new logical connections between two or more events as episodes (causal or otherwise); and the nucleus of one event's effect upon the other(s) defines the habit as well as the logical relationship holding between the two. (p. 3)

This understanding of habit as dynamic and meaning-generating is particularly illuminating when considering the transformation of ancient Chinese belief systems within the digital realm. As we previously discussed, these innovations are technological novelties which echo what Peirce (1935, 1958) identified as the very core nature of *habit*: behavior informed by belief structures that adapt to new circumstances and resist rigid adherence to tradition. Peirce contends that habit must ultimately foster a new intellectual order of things—a preferable way of resolving an anticipated problem, usually prompted by

some rationale, however implied (West, 2019)—. Accordingly, a habit arises in response to a “belief in a guideline” (West, 2019, p. 4); a notion that denotes a *dispositional capacity*, similar to previously established beliefs that may remain dormant until activated by suitable conditions. Possessing such a belief entails a predisposition to act or think in alignment with an internalized conviction that delineates certain responses as appropriate or meaningful within specific contexts, prior to conscious deliberation. This interpretive process is essential not only in traditional ritual practice but also in digital contexts, where emerging ritual forms are understood and performed in alignment with previously held beliefs; now enhanced and adapted. In these settings, a belief in a guideline continues to function as a dispositional capacity, shaping how users engage with digital rituals. Moreover, algorithmic recognition of contextual factors (such as lunar calendar timing, geomantic alignment, or ancestral data) can simulate, reinforce, or even co-create meaningful ritual activity, demonstrating that these guidelines remain operative even in technologically mediated spaces. Remarkably, West elaborates that “the apprehension of the deictic components of like future event structures (orientation and location features) hastens the organization of likely episodes, hence implicitly recommending actual performance of the events themselves” (West 2019, p. 3).

Assuch, the emerging hybrid forms of ritual are not merely representations; they function as *Thirds*: symbols that generalize past practices into newly intelligible forms through cultural reasoning and technological mediation (West, 2019). Thus, the integration of AI into funerary practices should not be seen as a break from tradition, but rather as an instance of tradition’s semiotic vitality; its ability to change meaningfully while maintaining continuity. Thus, the evolution of traditional Chinese funerary practices exemplifies the logic of integrating artificial intelligence in contemporary digital rituals, which does not undermine ancestral belief systems but instead might broaden their semiotic reach.

These observations function as a cautionary reminder that the disruptions linked to traditional death rituals, which have largely transitioned to digital formats during the pandemic, have underscored the potential role of digital-synthetic media as mediators in this balance. From this vantage point, the digital milieu creates transformative liminal spaces that differentiate distinct “before” states (characterized by anxiety, discomfort, and insecurity) from “after” states defined by reassurance, comfort, and a sense of closeness. In the context of the pandemic, the observation of the efficacy of digital rituals, coupled with the opportunities provided later by the development of AI-based thanabots, has likely catalyzed a shift, or even a translation, of these habits. The digital space has introduced new means for engaging with death rituals, subtly altering the way these practices are enacted and experienced. Thus, as people engage with these new forms, a habit may emerge in response to the virtual and technological

mediation of ancestral communication, leading to observable outcomes. The result is a reconfiguration of the ritualistic framework, enabling a new approach that both honors traditional practices and incorporates the transformative potential of digital innovation.

In this outlook, digital spaces have emerged as arenas for imaginative re-figuration, capable of redirecting the mythical semiosis of the original text(s) according to metaphorical or pseudo-mythological structures. Within these frameworks, mythological conceptual motifs are organized and mediated by AI systems, according to rationally codifying criteria (Augieri, 1991) within a network of intertextual references that ultimately relate back to the digital universe. In these contexts, vernacular expressions transcend mere obfuscation of underlying power relations; they also act as instruments through which the majority exercises symbolic authority, thereby reinforcing vernacular legitimacy. This dynamic introduces complexity into the religious domain by engendering informal hierarchies and emphasizing the mediating function of AI generative systems, wherein philosophical-religious narratives and digital imagery become structurally integrated.

Traditional Chinese cosmologies uphold that the demarcation between life and death is fluid rather than binary, existing along a continuum. The persistence of this belief, manifested both through enduring ritual practices and their digital adaptations, demonstrates a profound axiological commitment to sustaining intimacy with ancestral figures. Over time, this commitment has the potential of solidifying into a fixation of belief, underpinned by the epistemic authority progressively conferred upon AI-generated thanabots. These digital entities function not only as technological intermediaries but also as axiological mediators, instrumental in preserving and performing ritual continuity.

4. A MAGICAL MODEL FOR COMMUNICATION

At this junction, starting from the premise that AI embodies a *technocephalic mimesis* (defined as a computational replication of human cognitive processes) we investigate the potential of this technology to significantly alter perceptions of mortality through various mechanisms, potentially giving rise to a *postmortal society* (Hurtado, 2017) where death is no longer perceived as an absolute conclusion. Through the integration of *generative artificial intelligence* methodologies alongside Pre-trained Generative Transformers (GPTs) within Large Language Models (LLMs), organizations such as SuperBrain have developed digital systems that facilitate seamless communication while also emulating contextually empathetic responses (Hurtado, 2022). This advancement augments coherence by employing linguistic patterns that are intrinsically linked to trustworthiness and relational proximity, a notion previously recognized as significant and desirable within Chinese funerary customs.

This potential is predicated on a shift in dialogical communication between the living and the deceased, whereby individuals can engage in conversations with chatbots specifically designed to construct, through gathered data, a digital visage of the deceased individuals. Consequently, the *digital trail* generated by AI profiles individuals comprehensively, revealing preferences, histories, trends, affinities and personality traits. However, in contrast to traditional funerary rituals, which are predicated on the assumption of interaction between the living and the deceased (albeit one that is not actively performed by the latter) these novel rituals require active participation from both parties, while still remaining rooted in established ritualistic traditions. From this perspective, AI functions as a *translator of a habit* by introducing the concept of the Virtual Deceased Visage (VDV). This speculative construct adeptly emulates the behaviors and characteristics of an individual who has passed away, allowing their continued role as social actors in a posthumous context, thereby maintaining human social connections. These practices underscore a concerted effort to maintain the continual welfare and spiritual guidance of deceased ancestors in the lives of their descendants, significantly leveraging established rituals within the digital realm.

By contextualizing this speculative concept within the framework of digital immortality studies, we propose the VDV as a manifestation of the posthumous visage, which potentially creates an illusion of sustaining social connections between the living and the deceased through its ritualized enactment. The theoretical basis for this *illusion* fundamentally lies in obligatory behaviors that, when repeated, constitute a ritual enabling covert communication between the living and the dead. Consequently, an analysis of this socio-cultural transformation reveals a *magical paradigm* that assumes particular significance in light of ongoing developments within the historical trajectory of Chinese vernacular practices.

The concept of magic has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate within the field of religious studies; it is variously understood as a practice and a form of esoteric knowledge distinguished by its purported ability to manipulate natural forces, while concurrently being repudiated as fraudulent and condemned by both civil and religious institutions⁹. The terms *magic*, *mage*, and *magician* in the English language are derived from the Latin word *magus*, which traces its origins to the Greek μάγος, ultimately sourced from the Old

⁹ In the early days of comparative studies (Tylor, 1871), which were oriented towards absolute *evolutionism*, magic was viewed as humanity's most primitive attempt to establish causal relationships: by interpreting mere temporal sequences and subjective associations as objective causal links, primitive man would have created a 'pseudo-science' aimed at controlling the forces of nature. Given that practices intended to invoke effects in nature are also found within religious contexts, J. G. Frazer (1976) posed the question regarding the distinction between magic and religion: according to his proposed solution, they correspond to two opposing mental frameworks; for religion, the world is governed by supernatural personal beings addressed through prayers and sacrifices, whereas magic presupposes a system of impersonal forces upon which coercive action is possible. Conversely, an alternative viewpoint associated with sociologist Marcel Mauss (1904) and Émile Durkheim (1912) characterizes magic as private rites and ceremonies, distinguishing it from religion —defined as a communal and organized endeavor.

Persian *magus*, believed to have evolved from the Proto-Indo-European root *megh-***magh*, signifying “to be able”. Furthermore, it appears that the Old Persian form permeated ancient Semitic languages, manifesting as Talmudic Hebrew *magosh*, Aramaic *amgusha* (meaning magician), and Chaldean *maghdim* (representing wisdom and philosophy). A brief examination of the Cambridge English-Chinese dictionary (2025)¹⁰ reveals a series of lexemes associated with the concept of the magical: illusionary, mysterious, powerful, enchanted¹¹.

This lexical ensemble, characterized by a range of articulated semantic nuances, can be interpreted as governed by a relationship of *parasynonymy*. Accordingly, compulsoriness/compulsion, defined as the perceived necessity or obligation to engage in particular actions, constitutes a central aspect of magical topologies. These topologies operate as meta-semiotic systems that not only suggest but actively enforce specific ritual norms, thereby directing behavior through an interplay of symbolic authority, tradition, and affective influence. These norms align with the belief that what defines magic is a distinctive power intrinsic to objects or individuals endowed with it: a potency that may be entirely illusionary or derived from an object that bestows it upon them. Accordingly, Lotman characterizes magic as having four prominent features (Lepic, 2002): (1) *bilateralism*, which denotes that both participants in the magical act occupy dual roles as subject (speaker) and object (listener); (2) the establishment of a “*contractual*” *relationship* between the involved parties; (3) “*compulsoriness*”, whereby each participant exerts influence over the other; and (4) “*equivalence*”, which signifies a balance characteristic of conventional, signed relationships (Lotman, 1993, p. 345). However, it might also be the case that one participant perceives themselves as lacking the capacity to exert tangible influence over another; instead, they harbor expectations of receiving an unexplained gift. As such, they establish a “correlation” between their own agency and an “inexplicable power” through various actions intended to warrant this gift, all while their anticipation is grounded in the belief that such intangible forces lie beyond their control. This concept resonates with Arthur Clarke’s interpretation of magic, wherein he posits that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” (Clarke, 1973, p. 20).

Magic thus emerges as a performative act executed by an agent (Tambiah, 1999), with its essence invariably related to either an indirectly influenced object (communication) or one subject to instrumental manipulation through certain “supernatural” phenomena. Consequently, when individuals possess both listening and speaking capacities, the speaking function is directly associated with the agent’s own magical practices, whereas the listening function corresponds to mythological frameworks related to magical agents. This

¹⁰ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-chinese-simplified/magic> - Accessed: March 5, 2025

¹¹ Hyphenation. 神奇 [shénqí] magical; mystical; miraculous. 魔术 [móshù] magic, juggling. 巫术 [wūshù] witchcraft. 魅力 [mèilì] charm; glamor; charisma.

connection situates these agents within ritualized norms derived from ancestral traditions that practitioners of magic are expected to master. From this vantage point, belief assumes a critical role as a sociocognitive resource that enables the formation of perspectives and modes of interaction among groups by simplifying or reducing the complexity inherent in representing reality (Fabbri, 2020). Belief thus operates as an intersubjective construct that shapes how groups perceive their ways of being and acting, while simultaneously influencing the observation and treatment of alterity. From this point of view, as Leone elucidates:

Beliefs can be generally construed as patterns that, given the immersion of a being in a situation, select the potential alternatives that can be cognized as accessible from such a situation. Constructing new beliefs therefore means creating new patterns that link a present situation with its potential alternatives; or rather, to say it in structural terms, that define the value and meaning of a situation experienced as present in relation to its potential alternatives. (Leone, 2011, p. 282)

The dimension of belief is intricately connected to the notion of re-enchantment and elucidates a particular form of ambivalence: the coexistence of belief and disbelief concerning the efficacy of specific ritual practices. In this context, re-enchantment denotes the resurgence or continuity of symbolic significance, emotional profundity, and spiritual resonance within contexts that might otherwise be characterized by rationalization, secularization, or technological mediation. This concept is especially relevant to practices linked with vernacular expressions of religion and spirituality, understood as emergent manifestations of lived religions. While this dynamic reveals various aspects, it also indicates the potential for examining the re-socialization of ancestors through vernacularized (idiosyncratic) responses to AI-driven cultures, wherein ritual continuity functions as a resilient and familiar cultural element amid unforeseen social disruptions. From this vantage point, vernacular rituals additionally represent a form of symbolic resilience against the intrusive demands associated with neoliberalism.

5. CONCLUSION

Li Bai (701-762), maybe the most famous ancient Chinese poet, wrote: “The living are but passersby who stray; the dead return, in eternity they stay. The World is a guesthouse, and our journey—with grief—a dust of eternity’s sway”¹². Life and death are simply circulations of the natural order, and death marks the end of worldly treadmills and a final rest in peace. Besides echoing what we have

¹² 生者為過客，死者為歸人。天地一逆旅，同悲萬古塵。 Cited from: [https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/%E6%93%AC%E5%8F%A4_\(%E7%94%9F%E8%80%85%E7%88%B2%E9%81%8E%E5%AE%A2\)](https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/%E6%93%AC%E5%8F%A4_(%E7%94%9F%E8%80%85%E7%88%B2%E9%81%8E%E5%AE%A2))

discussed at the very beginning of the text, the beliefs in the end of the Course of Men and the intersectionality between different worlds, enacted via repetition as a mediational performance, serve as vernacular authority in mediating the exchange between different worlds for resocializing the bereft from other worlds back to the world of living beings. After the abrupt bereavement that both the face and the visage disappear since the person is gone, rituals are performed to bring the dead back to the social network of the living in order to reconstruct the visage of the deceased. The unilateral communication between the living and the dead also indicates the fluidity of such rituals. Only if one considers the kernel of rituals aimed at resocializing the bereft in the community can we foretell all kinds of transformations of such practices in the future, in the same way as the past foresaw our present-day mourning practices: Confucius would be angry to see today's mourning rituals by commenting them as "The collapse of rites and music"¹³, yet the dynamics of vernacular authority lies precisely in liberating themselves in form while hinging on the core practice—in our case, resocialization—which refers, again, to the cultural memory of the Chinese people.

However, the introduction of digital resurrection has changed the landscape of mourning in terms of its resocialization attempts. AI-driven technologies bring new possibilities for speaking with the deceased, which alternatively mediate the relationship between the living and the dead, further changing how vernacular authorities regarding mourning operate in the social sphere. Since the vernacular authorities are always a social product and are constructed through lived experiences, the understanding of death goes beyond the end of biological life and is extended towards a digital presence of the dead: By textual inputs from the deceased, AI chatbots create an uncanny avatar (which, clearly, links to the "uncanny valley effect") and can interact with the living in conversations. In this context, re-enchantment is not merely a return to pre-modern belief systems but rather a complex process that integrates secular and religious components, in ways that challenge conventional assumptions. This intricate coexistence is manifested in various practices that render the past present, cultivating ritual frameworks that evoke feelings of awe, reverence, and a renewed sense of belonging.

The article further discusses that re-enchantment, conceptualized as a form of "re-making", encapsulates the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity amid technological evolution and social transformations. Herein lies an extension of re-enchantment beyond mere belief systems to include vernacular rituals engendered in AI-driven contexts, symbolizing a reclamation of elements from social and cultural life that have been lost or forgotten. This "re-making" process is pivotal for comprehending how deceased individuals can be re-socialized in the digital age; a process which encapsulates shifting

¹³ 禮崩樂壞 [lǐ bēng yuè huài]. The comment was made by Confucius in the context of the collapse of Zhou Dynasty, when the nobles were no longer following the rituals prescribed by the emperor and performed their rituals in the way

representations of personhood. By textual inputs from the deceased, AI chatbots create an uncanny avatar (which, clearly, links to the “uncanny valley effect”) and can interact with the living in conversations. In this vein, the “traditional,” unilateral communication between the living and the dead becomes bilateral, creating an illusion of the bereft and re-enchanting mourning practices by summoning the dead again in the form of chatbots, much as photographs provide a paradox between life and dead, as Barthes (2010) argued. He noted that when viewing a photograph of a deceased person —such as in memorial photography— the individual often appears to be merely sleeping, evoking a sense of peace. However, if the person visibly looks deceased or if the viewer is aware of their death, the image takes on an eerie and unsettling quality. Sherlock notes, “Perhaps his astonishment in photography is now our astonishment in digital technology” (2013, p. 174). Whereas a rationalized world, as Weber (2001) conceptualizes, demystifies the world beyond mortal reaches, digital resurrection reintroduces mysticism (digital necromancy, as Sherlock (2013) notes) in the social sphere along with the advancements in technology. Let us imagine a situation where an image of the dead is replaced with an AI-driven chatbot. It is an eerie format, but people would soon get used to it in the same way as people became accustomed to photography.

Sebeok has the famous thesis: “to be alive is to be semiotically active” (cited from Kull, Emmeche & Hoffmeyer, 2011, p. 2). If we apply the criteria to digital resurrection, we can find the uncanniness in its essence. It is an interesting point here that the original German word for uncanny is *Unheimlich* in Freudian terms, which literally means “not homely.” The bereft, when being resocialized, are brought “back home” by reconstructing the social links with the visage. But in AI chatbots, the physical face is also resurrected digitally and pretends that the dead is biologically alive. The digital avatar of the dead seemingly creates new texts in its interaction with the living by pretending the dead is biologically alive, which indicates that the resocialization attempt from the mourners can give place to the perception of aliveness from the dead. However, built upon the texts that already exist, the illusion only has a second-hand agency that is merely a retelling and reorganizing of existing personal texts that are no longer semiotically active from the perspective of the bereft. This illusionary agency becomes crucial in imparting apparent autonomy to the deceased, thus enabling digital avatars to perform actions and respond in manners reminiscent of their social roles. However, what might seem like agency on behalf of the deceased is instead a meticulously crafted facade simulating presence and continuity. The “magical” power of this illusion resides in its capacity to sustain continuity, not solely through memory but via a digitally mediated construct that serves as a conduit for re-socialization. The Course of Men, or the journey as Li Bai wrote, is prolonged in digital resurrection, but it is no longer a meaning-making agency that has its own face and visage in the social sphere.

Moreover, the illusion created by digital resurrection may stifle the dynamics of vernacular authority and bring a stalemate in the lived experiences of mourning the dead. While mourning rituals rely on repetition and reinterpretation, digital resurrection fossilizes the deceased in a particular textual and visual form, curating their identity in a way that limits organic transformation. By anchoring the deceased in an AI-generated representation, it risks reducing them to a static artifact rather than allowing their memory to be reshaped by collective remembrance. The participatory, ever-evolving nature of mourning is thus constrained, as interactions with the resurrected digital persona may become scripted and predictable, leaving little space for reinterpretation and vernacular agency. Consequently, instead of fostering a dynamic interplay between past and present, digital resurrection risks creating an artificial continuity that suppresses the emergent, contested, and heteroglossic nature of cultural memory. In this way, it paradoxically disrupts the very processes of meaning-making and negotiation that mourning rituals have long sustained, turning the fluidity of commemoration into a rigid, algorithmically mediated simulation of presence. Ultimately, in digital resurrection, the *prolonged journey* is designed for the dead via visages, while the traveler —the living participant— is no longer fully present as the face wanes.

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* The dataset that supports the results of this study is not available for public use. The research data will be made available to reviewers, if required.



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