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Affective life of Mongolian proverbs in times of COVID-19 lockdown in China

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how recontextualised Mongolian proverbs during the COVID-19 lockdown reframe and make sense of crisis events as Inner Mongolia enters lockdown and its residents go through daily PCR testing since October 2022. The study finds that reworked well-known Mongolian sayings centring on COVID testing act as a form of sociopolitical commentary, a coping strategy, and a language community-building device. The light-heartedness and delight inherent in the process of recontextualising Mongolian proverbs not only discursively create distance between the difficult time experienced by people and themselves but also generate a space for linguistic creativity as the Mongolian online users experiment with and recontextualise the new Chinese terms *hesuan jiance*, PCR testing. It also finds that the affect of immuno-apparatus discharged by these reinvented proverbs offers us an important insight into people's changing responses to pandemic policies during the very last phase of China's 'war' against the virus. The study contributes to our understanding of multilingualism, affect and agency in times of crisis.

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Multilingualism; political satire; affect; agency; crisis communication

Introduction

The pandemic throws people into a liminal moment – a moment characterised by death, silence, withdrawal, and darkness as the flow of life suddenly comes to a halt, and the existing order is suspended. However, liminal life can be rife with creativity. New practices, symbols, and rituals are generated during a liminal phase, including neologisms and creative plays with them (e,g. Turner, 1969). In this article, we focus on playful ways in which multilingual minority Mongols insert the Chinese loan word *hesuan jiance* (核酸检测 the nucleic acid test; PCR test) and PCR test-related expressions into well-known Mongolian proverbs in the context of China's stringent COVID-19 testing regimen and draconian quarantine enforcement– known as the zero COVID policy. By examining creative language plays, the article offers a glimpse into the experiences and feelings of people during the second half of 2022 – the last phase of the COVID-19 policy in China.

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Since its outbreak, the pandemic has taken on a unique political life of its own in many countries. Since early 2020, the Chinese government has employed stringent testing and quarantine policies driven by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) philosophy of 'people first, life first' (*rénmín zhìshàng, shēngmìng zhìshàng* 人民至上, 生命至上) in the nationwide 'war' against the virus (Sorace & Loubere, 2022). Through zero COVID governance, the Chinese regime constructs and maintains the image of China as the safest country in the world and its political system as superior to Western democracies in general and America in particular (Sorace & Loubere, 2022). As Zhang and Xu (2023) pointed out, the Chinese state successfully constructed a sense of nationalism to facilitate its own interests in response to the crisis.

Yet, notwithstanding the role of the pandemic in strengthening nationalism, exacerbating nationalistic tensions, and expanding the state's administrative capacity in China (An & Zhang, 2024), the regime's construction of an elaborate immuno-apparatus that maps and tracks the population and depends on both public compliance and coercion – did result in low levels of transmission, illness, and death due to the virus until China abandons zero COVID policy at breakneck pace in December 2022 (Guan et al., 2024; Sorace & Loubere, 2022). Thus far, the societal and political significance of zero COVID governance and people's changing responses to a series of immunity and security-obsessed COVID control strategies have not been sufficiently explored, except by a few studies mentioned below.

Undergoing nearly three years of periodic lockdown and massive testing, the Chinese public's response to the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic shifted from sporadic resistance to sustained optimism and finally to cynical pessimism intermixed with outrage and small-scale protests against endless restrictive measures (e,g. L.G., 2022). Initially, during the epidemic outbreak in late December 2019 in Wuhan, as remarked by Liu (2020), numerous netizens and residents drew on a wide-ranging repertoire of discourses and symbols to heighten public spectacles of suffering and sympathy, which placed extensive blame on the lies, negligence, and censorship of the government. However, such sporadic social protests in cyberspace were soon subsumed by the hegemonic narratives of victory and patriotism (Baioud, 2020; Piller et al., 2020). Most importantly, investigating how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced public trust in the central government, Guan et al. (2024) find that public confidence in the central government increased remarkably after the pandemic broke out in Wuhan, stayed elevated for over two years and returned to the pre-pandemic level after the Shanghai lockdown, that is after March 2022.

It is helpful to mention that the declined trust in the government during the last phase of COVID control in 2022 took place in concert with economic stagnation, increasing youth unemployment rate, and several episodes of local government mismanagement, corruption, and abuse of power (L.G., 2022). In November 2022, a flurry of protests, known as the White Paper Movement, mainly involving university students, calling to end the constant nucleic acid testing and forced relocation to centralised quarantine facilities also took place across many cities in China. Hence, as the zero COVID governance began to lose its rationalities and public confidence in the central government declined, it was only natural that political sarcasm and jokes challenging containment measures proliferated to an unprecedented extent in social media spaces across China. Mongolian language media space is no exception to this trend. This study is situated in this last

stage of the pandemic. Specifically, it examines political satires couched in the reworked Mongolian proverbs using PCR test-related expressions. In the following, we briefly introduce the research methodology, followed by an overview of political satire in Chinese online spaces. We then present the analysis of the reworked Mongolian proverbs and how they function as a political commentary and community-building device at the dawn of 'liberation' before concluding with a discussion.

Digital ethnography

For this study, we adopt a digital ethnography approach to explore the recontextualisation of Mongolian proverbs on the social media platform *Bainu*. The methodology of digital ethnography involves various frames of analysis, attention to history, and the local contexts and lived experiences of digital media (Coleman, 2010). *Bainu*, akin to WeChat, is a popular Mongolian language social media platform, where everything is written in the traditional Mongolian script. There, Mongols share their everyday life, exchange information and discuss social and cultural events (Baioud & Khuanuud, 2022). Concentrated discussions on specific hot topics related to the Mongolian language, culture, and society sometimes occur in *Bainu* and last for a few days while sidelining other content.

We have been attentive to such discussions generated by *Bainu* users since 2015 and have participated in some discussions as users. During three years of COVID-19 control in China, we have also been close observers of the '*Bainu world*', where the users share their everyday lives and alternating moods during the pandemic. In addition, we also paid close attention to the evolution of the pandemic situation in Inner Mongolia by accessing official news and chatting online with relatives and friends since we were and are part of the community. In other words, despite our being located outside China during the pandemic, we had good knowledge, though not an embodied one, about the effect of the pandemic on the wider society, which certainly infiltrated *Bainu* and generated discussions.

On *Bainu*, themed discussions lasting a few days in early November 2022, akin to hashtag chats on Twitter, are called *davalgalah* (literally: 'making waves of water'). It was during the last stage of the pandemic that one Bainu user started the *davalgan* (literally: 'waves') of making PCR test-themed proverbs by enjoining other users to take part in it. We identified and downloaded around 120 proverbs as well as alliterative four-line sentences made by *Bainu* users utilising the PCR text-related expressions. For this study, we choose 67 recontextualised Mongolian proverbs after excluding those that do not meet the stylistic criterion of proverbial expressions (e.g. poems) and that overlap in content. Simultaneously, we categorised the 67 remade proverbs into four thematic groups.

Additionally, in the analyses of the proverbs, where necessary, we draw on a complementary dataset consisting of the photos collected from *Bainu* during the pandemic and informal discussions with friends and relatives in Inner Mongolia both during and after the pandemic. To clarify, the informal discussions were not directly initiated by us in the first place. While we were in Inner Mongolia after the pandemic between May 2023 and September 2023, it was friends or relatives curious about life in Western countries who started to query about pandemic experiences in countries other than China, which was often followed by their own account of what they felt about the

COVID control in their own places. But it is undeniable that our mere presence in our respective communities, after several years of absence, indirectly elicits discussions about COVID and other topics. Where necessary in the analysis, we draw upon these data generated from informal discussions.

Online political satires as tactics and networked affective practices

Many scholars working in the political resistance and control framework approached Chinese online media platforms as public spaces for political expression (Lee, 2016; Yang, 2022). While debating about the impact of online media on politics, some adopt the dualism of resistance and control; others highlight the importance of examining the nuances and subtleness of symbolic and discursive practices in media spaces. Gleiss (2015), in line with the latter's argument, for instance, examines the discursive struggles of one NGO organisation on the Chinese microblog platform *Weibo* and employs a broadened notion of politics, referred to as minimal politics. She shows how political contestation often occurs through activists' rearticulating elements from official discourses and creating polyphonic discourses camouflaging social criticism. Yang (2022) also noted a similar strategy for creating polyphony in his most recent study on the Wuhan lockdown. While describing the scenes of 'citizen yelling at the state' on social media in the face of warlike enforcement of quarantine policy, Yang examined the viral video of a Gong-beating woman who cried out for help on her balcony while beating loudly on a metal wash basin as if it were a Gong (Yang, 2022, p. 56). Her yelling and shouting at authorities do not just assume innovative forms but also invoke an ancient Chinese practice of sounding the gong to air grievances. Such intermix and collision of symbols from different spatial temporalities has long been part and parcel of creative and critical online protest culture. Therefore, more than any other genres, political satires and jokes utilise cultural remixes and engage in minimal politics.

The somewhat untameable, order-subverting and fleeting political satires fit well with how de Certeau (1984) describes tactics. He argues,

> A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus … thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a manoeuvre within enemy territory (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37).

Creative plays taking place within the discursive field of authority are certainly a tactic practised in enemy territory. Such manipulation and plays do not have their own locus of power as space is completely taken up and filled with hegemonic discourse centring on immunity and people's 'war' against the virus. Hence, the tactic poaches in the official discursive field and creates surprises by playing with COVID-19 governance techniques such as PCR testing.

As Mongolian media users mix the most sacrosanct technique of immuno-apparatus – *hesuan jiance* (the nucleic acid testing) and other PCR test-related expressions – with age-old Mongolian proverbs, the seriousness of political terms is turned into imaginary delirium and constraints of everyday life give way to liminal freedom (see also Abrahams & Babcock, 1977). In addition, such verbal plays not only cast the political terms in a satiric light but also wrench the proverb from its seriousness. After all, proverbs are a rich manifestation

of a society's values, beliefs, and worldview and serve valuable didactic and communicative purposes (Lomotey & Csajbok-Twerefou, 2021). Intermarrying the Chinese loan word *hesuanjiance* with Mongolian proverbs constitutes a double game with Chinese political discourse around the zero COVID policy and traditional Mongolian proverbs.

Above all, mass participation and wild proliferation reinforce the potency of recontextualising proverbs in digital realms in the context of COVID control, which further enhances the satiric effect and entertains participants. Yang and Jiang (2015) argue that the significance of online political satire, which adopts strategies such as modifying ancient poems and famous sayings, is a participatory activity involving multitudes of people interacting through digital networks. In this sense, multilingual Mongols' play with well-known sayings is what Yang and Jiang (2015, p. 216) termed a networked practice. First, it is networked at the level of participants as most of them work on the same word, *hesuan jiance* and with well-known sayings as if passing the baton in a relay. Second, newly created proverbs conditioned by China's COVID policies are intertextual and networked with their prior counterparts, that is, the unstated original proverbs. Finally, remade proverbs as a whole are intertextual with various other online memes and videos poking fun at daily COVID testing and quarantine policies during the last phase of COVID control.

As a result, interlinked proverbs, just as the national sentence-making in Chinese media spaces investigated by Yang and Jiang (2015), function as much a pleasure-infused creative ritual as an expression of political discontent. This two-pronged nature of online political satire is also underlined by Alkaraki et al. (2024) in their recent review article on social media humour related to the COVID-19 pandemic. They find that humour expressed via various linguistic devices, including wordplay, irony, satire, and parody, serves as a coping mechanism promoting mental well-being and a powerful tool to critique government actions, uncover inefficiencies, and shape public discourse.

However, appreciating the multivocal and emotion-infused political satire requires an affective angle in the analysis apart from the usual discursive approach. This is because any endeavour to make sense of the emotional specificity of life under stringent pandemic prevention measures has to first come to terms with the knowledge that pandemic life is diffused with an atmosphere of existential precariousness. Anguish, fear, madness, or doubt takes the upper hand as we enter what de Martino (2012) termed 'crisis of presence'. It is the crisis of not being there—the destruction (erstwhile suspension) of cultural life and human history (de Martino, 2012, p. 440). Second, nation-states, as the most discernible collective actors in the drama of emergency themselves, are affective beings. Laszczkowski and Reeves (2015, p. 3) suggest that we should explore the state as the object of emotional investment – a site of fear, paranoia, or suspicion – by considering how emotion is implicated in a variety of everyday and exceptional encounters between citizens, state agents, and the dispersed material traces of state power.

In this vein, we take the remade COVID-testing-themed proverbs as a discursive site where we witness how the affective is politically engendered. For instance, the proverbs' references to physical or nonphysical encounters between the state/its agents dressed in hazmat suits and ordinary people charge spaces with particular affects, such as fear, irony, frustration or anger. These affects embodied by various materialities, in turn, move from one site to another in a 'rhizome-like' manner, to use the phrasing of Deleuze and Guattari (2004), and mediate a new state-citizen relationship formed during pandemic times. We

qualify the seemingly omnipresent and freely roaming affect in times of emergency by naming it the *affect of immuno-apparatus* to underline its embeddedness in a specific historical and biopolitical condition. Before we proceed further to the analysis, let us briefly introduce Mongolian proverbs and Inner Mongolia.

Bilingual Mongols

As an administrative unit, Inner Mongolia was first created by the Manchu acquisition of the Mongols in the seventeenth century (Munkh-Erdene, 2022). At the end of 1911, on the eve of the fall of the Manchu Qing Empire (1644–1912), Mongolia (then Outer Mongolia) proclaimed its independence which it achieved de facto in 1921. And in 1946 Mongolia eventually attained its de jure sovereignty. However, the southern part of the traditional Mongolian lands, Inner Mongolia, underwent tumultuous decades of successive rule by Chinese warlords (1912–1928), a nationalist regime (1928–1949) and imperial Japan (1931-1945). The Yalta Agreement in 1945 sealed the fate of Inner Mongolia as a part of China. In 1947, Inner Mongolia was established as the first non-Han ethnic autonomous government (in 1949 changed to 'autonomous region') two years before the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 (Cheng et al., 2023, pp. 319–323).

Today, the Mongol population of Inner Mongolia amounts to 4.2 million, which is around 17 per cent of the 24 million population. The Han Chinese constitute an overwhelming majority, reaching 79 per cent (Census, 2020). In the second half of the twentieth century, the founding of the PRC gradually established Mandarin Chinese as a powerful state language among the Inner Mongols. As a result of Mandarin's dominant position in almost all domains of socioeconomic and political life coupled with the assimilation-oriented language policies since the early 1990s, most Mongols born after 1980 are bilingual speakers (see Puthuval, 2017).

For the bilingual Mongols of Inner Mongolia, code-switching in everyday conversations is a common practice, and its marked uses in formal performances such as wedding ritual speeches and hip-hop songs serve particular metacommunicative purposes (Baioud, 2022, 2024). The fact that online participants are enjoined to insert the Chinese loan word *hesuan jiance* (nucleic acid testing) instead of its official Mongolian term, *bööm khüchilyn baichaalt* (or *shinjilgee*) – a calqued translation of its Chinese counterpart – into new proverbs enhances pleasure deriving from code-switching. Given that the official Mongolian translation of the Chinese expression *hesuan jiance* exists and is already widely used in formal written Mongolian texts, the online users' intentional mix of the Chinese term *hesuan jiance* with Mongolian proverbs by spelling the Chinese term out based on Mongolian orthographic rules enhances the power of satire aimed at mass COVID testing. After all, the new and non-nativised loan words are never allowed to enter the realm of written Mongolian.

Mongolian oral literature

In Mongolian culture, oral literature enjoys a prominent position, and Mongols value those who are witty and articulate. However, effective use of proverbs is increasingly considered a skill once mastered by elders yet gradually slipping out of young Mongols' repertoire in Inner Mongolia. Notwithstanding this widespread perception, online

creativity manifested in the re-invention of proverbs in the context of lockdown and COVID testing may speak otherwise about the allegedly declining verbal skills of Mongols. Our translations of the proverbs included in this study referenced *Mongolian folklore: A representative collection from the oral literary tradition* (1988) edited and translated by John Gombojab Hangin, which includes sixty-one proverbs apart from numerous riddles, songs, stories, epics, and panegyrics. Stylistically, Mongolian proverbs are usually couched in verse, often reflecting one or both of the essential features that characterise all Mongolian poetry – alliteration and parallelism (Hangin, 1988, p. 13).

The Mongols themselves, according to Hangin (1988, p. 15), distinguish four different kinds of proverbial expressions: *züir üg* (alliterating sayings), *mergen üg* (apt sayings), *tsetsen üg*, (wise sayings), and *surgaal üg* (didactic sayings). Content appears to serve as the sole criterion for this division. Regardless of this classification, proverbial expressions all serve as impersonal vehicles for personal communication in that proverbs embody the voices of the past and anonymous elders (Arewa & Dundes, 1964). The impersonal and indirect nature of proverbs in communicative practices led scholars working in pragmatics to argue that proverbs are used as polite, pragmatic verbal strategies that effectively handle tense situations in face-to-face communication (Agyekum, 2021). That proverbs can be utilised as an effective tool to deliver socio-political commentary is also shown in the recent study examining the lineage of Mongolian didactic hip hop in contemporary Mongolia (see Szczap, 2024). Pertinent to this study, it is noteworthy that the impersonal power of proverbs further accentuates sarcasm because it widens the distance between the 'real and serious' target object and the artistically represented one and hence absolves those engaging in hilarious laughter of responsibility. The very potency of jokes and sarcasm lies in this carefully managed distance from the 'real, uninteresting or menacing' target. Here, by 'real or menacing target' of satire, we refer to the pandemic regime's campaign-style zero COVID governance, a governance strategy widely recognised as a hallmark of CCP governance (Perry, 2020).

The reworked proverbs as a mirror to the last phase of pandemic life

Our discussion covers seven pairs of proverbs to illustrate the following four recurring themes in detail. In each case, we first recover and present the original well-known saying, followed by their newly reworked version mainly to bring the Mongolian netizens' shared linguistic and cultural contexts to the surface, which otherwise remain hidden. In that sense, in the online circulation of 'new' proverbs, the original forms of the proverbs – the prior text of the remade proverbs – silently stand in the backdrop, enhancing the users' shared joy and facilitating the formation of a new online linguistic community.

Parodying the immunity-obsessed and paranoid state

According to the COVID quarantine rules, close contacts of the infected are tracked down and quarantined for a certain number of days, subject to further PCR testing to prove their health status. However, the campaign-style implementation of the zero COVID policy 'upgraded' these former rules. Rather than limiting the movements of those who came into close contact with the infected, entire urban communities (*xiǎoqū* 小区) and whole suburbs could fall under control and be designated as high-risk areas just

because of the result of a single or a few diagnosed positive COVID-19 cases. At the same time, these risky areas were being locked down, and the people living there underwent mass PCR testing for weeks in Inner Mongolia.[1] In other words, mass PCR testing dictated people's daily life as shown in Figure 1, featuring the everyday scene of queueing for a COVID test. It is within such a context that the following proverb emerged.

(1) Proverb 1
neg ükheriin everi chohkhod,
mingan ukheriin ever sharkhirna.
When you strike the horn of one ox
The horns of a thousand oxen hurt. (original version)
neg nökhör arag chanar bolkhod,
mingan nökhör amaan godlulna.
When one man's test turns out positive,
The mouths of thousands are swabbed (tested). (reworked version)

It is obvious to readers that the original saying stressed group solidarity and the community of interests of people who share something in common. The recontextualised proverb, however, stresses the relentlessness of local government officials in their

Figure 1. A person inserted the 'Nucleic Acid Testing Record Card for All Personnel' card into his or her phone case, which also features the everyday scene of queueing for a COVID test.

implementation of zero COVID policy and shows the state's desire to keep the nation and people safe. Such desire is intrinsically not problematic. What is satirised here, however, is the evolvement of such a well-intended desire into an obsession with immunisation and security. It is this obsession that nourishes fear. Perhaps nothing embodies such fear and obsession than the following two photos wherein a herder living far away from towns in central Inner Mongolia undergoes testing on her ranch. At the same time, a metal plate with a bilingual warning sign reading 'Home Quarantine, Please Do Not Approach' was attached to the gate of her farm house (Figures 2 and 3).

As the state's immunity-security governance dictates life, people's emotional reactions also went out of proportion and saturated with surplus, as we shall see next. In the following case, the thoroughness and fervour saturating the zero COVID regime are materialised through an exaggerated portrayal of frontline workers' swab test practices.

(2) Proverb 2
davs khiivel uustal.
ajil khiivel duustal.
If you add salt, then (add it) until it dissolves.
If you do work, then (do it) until it is finished. (original version)
davs khiivel uustal.
hesuan *khiivel bööljtel*.
If you add salt, then (add it) until it dissolves.
If they perform a nucleic acid test (via a mouth swab), then (they do it) until people vomit. (reworked version)

The original saying is used very frequently by Mongols. The gist lies in the second line, which enjoins perseverance. Yet, its counterpart in the pandemic regime comments negatively on district volunteers and health workers by stressing their irritable and blunt manner of doing mouth swabs. Furthermore, the exaggerated description of how the test was rigorously performed on people hints at unspoken fear and nervousness flowing through bodies living under zero COVID governance. Nothing embodies and manifests the nervousness of the pandemic regime more than the state agents and

Figure 2. A health worker conducts a PCR test on a herder in a pastoral area.

Figure 3. A metal plate with a bilingual warning sign that reads 'Home Quarantine, Please Do Not Approach' was attached to the herder's gate.

embodied extensions of immuno-apparatus, such as local officials and volunteers, and their relentless and hyper-diligent practices.

In his book *The Politics of Immunity*, Mark Neocleous (2022, p. 300) argues, 'Fuelled by a nervousness over its security, immunity, and identity, and by its fears of enemies real or imagined, we are confronted by the nervous state'. This nervous state charges its agents, their bodies and movements with a particular force. Similarly, underscoring how affect is politically generated via tangible materials, Navaro-Yashin (2012, p. 125), in her study on the make-believe space in post-war Cyprus, cogently argues that the material objects of governance such as passports and other documents are affectively charged phenomena; they effect affect and become interiorised objects in their transactors. In the case of a highly-politicised mass campaign against the virus, the materialities such as the hands that are swabbing the public, or distancing white hazmat suits, or that banal and innocuous cotton swabs, take on a different life and transmit affects of fear, irony, wit or cynicism (see Figure 2). We termed this *the affect of immuno-apparatus*.

What is also striking is how the residues of such affect continue to live on as tangible traces remain in place. On one of the days in August 2023, almost a year after the end of pandemic control in China, while one of the authors was walking in a village in a remote part of Inner Mongolia with one of her female relatives, she pointed at the parallel lines painted on the street in front of the health clinic and village council and asked, 'Do you know what these green lines are for?' assuming someone like the author who has not experienced them may have no clue about them. Then she continues: 'You know, last winter we had to queue here every morning before sunrise, and it was so cold, and many people were sneezing. We all thought we would fall sick either from catching a cold or from catching the virus from someone standing next to us. It was a crazy time'. In retrospect, the stringent testing and daily queueing before sunrise so as not to interrupt the villagers' farm work became a somewhat unfathomable action. They carried a sense of eeriness because less than one month later, in December 2022, the government lifted its control overnight and left people at their own devices (see Figure 4).

The point is that what we call *the affect of immuno-apparatus* not only lingers in spaces but also undergoes a transformation as COVID-related objects remain in place and intrude on everyday life from time to time. Affect of fear and cynicism during the last stage of confinement and testing turned into a sense of loss – a loss of coherence and meaning – and disillusion afterwards. As China gave the virus free rein and dismantled what Sorace and Loubere (2022) termed 'the apparatus of containment and suffocation' overnight and plunged into the abyss of necropolitics, a brief episode of disillusion with nearly three years of stringent COVID control takes hold, which some described as chimera-like three years.

However, the sudden arrival of the long-lost freedom, in combination with the state's triumphant announcement of its success in combatting the virus aiming to mitigate memories of painful lockdowns and the defiant protests, urged people to move on without allowing them any space to reflect on the past three years. Travelling and gathering characterised the first few months of 'liberation', with an occasional surge of sobbing and mourning for the dead in quiet corners of streets. Let us return to the proverbs transmitting related but different affects without further digression.

(3) Proverb 3
bey baatar bolvoos negen üyiin baatar.
bilig baatar bolvoos tümen üyiin baatar.
A hero of the body is a hero of one occasion.
A hero of the mind is a hero of ten thousand (uncountable) occasions.(original version)
bey baatar bolvoos negen üyiin baatar.
bilig chanar bolvoos negen khoroololiin bayar.
A hero of the body is a hero of one occasion.
One's negative test result is the happiness of one neighbourhood. (reworked version)

The proverb is one of the famous didactic sayings of Chinggis Khan (*Chinggisiin bilig surgaal*), and its meaning is straightforward in valuing intellect and knowledge over physical strength. Nevertheless, the reworked proverb conditioned by COVID governance in China articulates the reality of life under lockdown wherein one

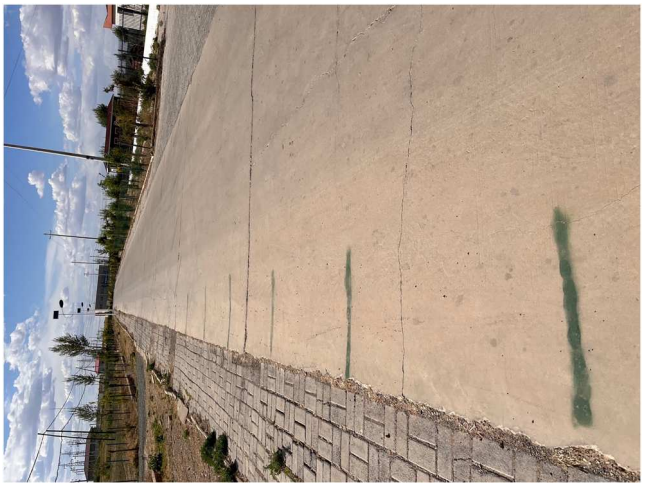

Figure 4. The green lines indicating 'Keep one-meter distance while queueing for Covid test'.

person's COVID test result can determine the fate of many, including whether the initially imposed lockdown will be prolonged further or whether a residential compound will be re-classified as a low- or high-risk area with corresponding levels of stringent testing and quarantine measures. The reworked proverb emerged precisely in such a context. However, from another aspect, the recontextualised proverb also shows how the life of confinement is rarefied to such a degree that one's happiness or sadness revolves around COVID tests and everyday statistics of infectious cases. In this sense, it is also an example of how a specific affect, such as collective joy and disappointment, is conditioned and politically manufactured by the state's immuno-apparatus.

Satirising official discourses and exposing corruption

Mimicking a specific practice of the state and skilfully transplanting it to other contexts has been noted as an important discursive strategy in online political satire by several scholars (Gleiss, 2015; Lee, 2016). The reinvented proverbs in our data likewise rephrase official discourse and tactically play with the message: 'trust in the government and do not be afraid' which was communicated by official media since the onset of the pandemic. For instance, the fourth pair of proverbs, initially highlighting the importance of perseverance, pokes fun not only at the zero COVID measures but also at the demand from the state asking for people's trust in its policy as forced confinement and other related measures gradually lose their raison d'être in the context of raging Omicron variant, over-implementation of policies and corruption in health sectors.

(4) Proverb 4
khol khemeen büü chöh, yavbaas khüryü.
khünd khemeen büü ayu, ergüvees daayu.
Do not be disheartened by its distance; you will reach it as long as you take the first step.
Do not be discouraged by its difficulty; you will overcome it as long as you try. (original version)
khol khemeen büü chöh, yavbaas khüryü.
khijig khemeen büü ayu, ***hesuan-****dvaas yalayu*.
Do not be disheartened by its distance; you will reach it as long as you take the first step.
Do not be scared by the pandemic; we will win as long as you undertake nucleic acid tests. (reworked version)

Especially as local officials' over-implementation of zero COVID policies causes tragic losses of lives, the official slogan appeals to people's trust in the government, and its measures collapse and become desacralised. For instance, the villagers in a distant countryside in eastern Inner Mongolia, on several occasions, brought up how a young university student perished in a fire accident while being quarantined alone in an unsafe temporary lodging in her home village. Her parents had to live in a separate house from their child according to the COVID-19 quarantine rule. She was one of those university students forced to return home from the capital city, Hohhot, in November 2022 as the Omicron variant began to take over campuses.

In fact, in the second half of 2022, a series of social outcries at collusion between PCR testing manufacturers and local officials were voiced online, and this further eroded public trust in the government's COVID-19 control measures. The next saying precisely hints at the illegal practices of some officials and businesses[2] who derive profits from

mass testing while people are subjected to ordeals of daily testing or forcibly relocated to quarantine centres.

(5) Proverb 5
jud bolkhod nokhoi targalna.
jovlon bolkhod noyod bayajina.
Blizzard makes dogs fat,
Suffering makes nobility rich. (original version)
jud bolkhod nokhoi targalna.
jovlon bolkhod ***hesuan*** *bayajina.*
Blizzard makes dogs fat,
Suffering makes the nucleic acid test (manufacturers) rich. (reworked version)

Apart from satirising the governance strategy of zero COVID policy and providing a glimpse into the emotion experienced by people during the last phase of the policy, online murmurs in the form of playful proverb-making reflect the quotidian life of people. For instance, the following proverbs stress the feeling of isolation, numbness and falling out of time as people plunge into a life of permanent suspension.

Reflecting on a rarified life under confinement and control

(6) Proverb 6
ekhnereeseen öör khün tanisangüi.
emeeleeseen öndör davaa davsangüi.
He has not come to know anyone except his wife,
He has not come to know any place higher than his horse saddle.(original version)
ekhnereeseen öör khün tanikhüi.
hesuan*-as öör yum medekhüi.*
One does not know anyone except his wife,
One does not know anything except the nucleic acid test. (reworked version)

The original proverb highlights one's lack of experience in life and casts a negative light on those who are inexperienced and have never ventured out of their small locale. Resonating with the prior text, the reworked proverb shows how one's life is reduced to a benumbed, dreary and lonesome state by the zero COVID governance. Parsons et al. (2024), writing in the context of North America, argue that 'loneliness generated by pandemic restriction manifests as a lack of variety in bodily attunement, interaction, and intersection with others'. Experience of loneliness, they point out, is 'not simply a lack of social relationships characterised by emotional and cognitive aspect; rather, it is bodily and emplaced, regulated through bodily interaction and mobility across places in the world' (Parsons et al., 2024, p. 287). In this sense, both the original proverb and the reinvented one speak to the importance of mobility or a variety of bodily interactions with places and other bodies and how its lack produces either a parochial person with limited life experiences or a person struck with pandemic loneliness.

While describing monotony and boredom suffered by people in lockdown, the reworked proverbs in our corpus also touch on how the life of those 'lucky' ones who are newly released from or not yet to be in lockdown also need to navigate biopolitics of digital governance and surveillance in the pandemic. As is well known, health codes (*jiànkāngmǎ* 健康码) and trajectory codes (*xíngchéngmǎ* 行程码) are mobile

applications for users to check and report their health status and their movements. Both were required to be installed on mobile phones during the pandemic. It is the PCR test results that produce digital health codes and enable people to navigate life in the immuno-apparatus, where mapping, tracking, and containing the population is of paramount importance (Sorace & Loubere, 2022). This health code system operates on a colour-coded scheme, where red indicates compulsory quarantine, yellow means 'self-isolation', and green signifies freedom to travel. Simultaneously, checkpoints and Q.R. code scanners are set up in public places to enforce the scheme (Zou, 2024, p. 940).

Commenting on various tech surveillance deployed by the state, one user joked: 'In the past, we had elderly aunties with names such as *Nansal**ma***, *Sebel**ma***, *and Norji**ma***, and in like manner, they were great storytellers. Now there emerges *erwei**ma*** (Q.R. codes), *xingcheng**ma*** (trajectory code*)*, and *jiankang**ma*** (health code) … There emerges so many *ma* now who track our movements and even swab our throats that god created for the sole purpose of drinking'. Supposedly, the Mongol elderly aunties whose names end with the syllable *ma* were kind, caring and culturally and spiritually nourishing in the past. Whereas, today's various tracking apps and codes that similarly end with the syllable *ma* can be menacing and aggressive. As McFalls and Pandolfi (2022, p. 131) argue, 'the almost unquestionable imperative to save life understood in its most elementary bodily sense concealed the power regime's evacuation of human life understood in terms of legal, political, and social rights'. It is this evacuation or reduction of life to the management of bodies that the above expressions and other similar ones evoke and critique. Yet, however intrusive and violent these tests and codes are, one cannot live without them, and one's exercise of limited mobility depends on them, as shown in the last pair of expressions (Proverb 7).

(7) Proverb 7
aaviin biid khüntei tanilch.
agtiin biid gajar üj.
While your father is alive, get to know people!
While you have a gelding, see places! (original version)
aaviin biid khüntei tanilch.
hesuan-*i sainaar gajar üj*.
While your father is alive, get to know people!
While you have a good (negative) test result, see places! (reworked version)

In the original proverb, the hearer is actually being enjoined to take advantage of his opportunities to learn while his parents are able to guide and protect him. Implied is the idea that one should accept direction from parents. As the proverb is recontextualised, the secondary element (horse) of the prior proverb, which formerly existed for the sake of stylistic purpose, becomes the key element (test result), as the reworked proverb urges people to take advantage of their negative COVID test results before they become positive, drenched with bitter humour.

Conclusion

This study has explored the crafty ways the Mongolian proverbs are interwoven to express discontent, derive sheer joy, lessen stress, and build a multilingual community. We have

argued that the appearance of these chains of proverbs, most of which either incorporate the Chinese loan word *hesuan* (a shortened version of *hesuan jiance*) or reference the PCR test, has to be read against the context of China's later phase of the zero COVID policy (see further Sorace & Loubere, 2022). We attempted to bring forth how a type of affect is manufactured by politics of immunity and, at the same time, embodied by and mediated through tangible material objects during the pandemic. It is significant to note how a specific class of affects has once structured a large swath of people's subjectivity and animated or constituted the state and its governmentality engaging in primordial biopolitics of life and death. The circulation of such politically-generated affect is itself integral to reconfiguring subjects or the states at certain critical historical junctures (Laszczkowski & Reeves, 2015).

The COVID test-themed proverbs not only show the impact of China's immuno-apparatus established during zero COVID governance on social bodies but also expose the affect discharged by this apparatus as well as interiorised and transmitted by social bodies. Driven by and saturated with the fear of a nervous state, its agents, including local officials, carry out their tasks with a zeal verging on mania. It is such mania and obsession with immunity and security that eventually caused harm to the social fabric by either mis- or over-managing the pandemic in 2022.

Finally, the analyses of the newly-emerged COVID-19-themed proverbs showed how political discontent and mocking are couched within and take refuge in the stylistic forms and familiarity of traditional sayings and rely on the practice of embedding Chinese loan words in Mongolian sayings. Conditioned by the specific historical and political moment, the process of remaking Mongolian proverbs involves a dynamic network of online users and discourses and gives rise to a highly participatory linguistic space, however fleeting it is (see also Yang & Jiang, 2015). Although COVID-19 governance deprived people of life that was understood in cultural and social terms, the networked practice of remaking proverbs creates life and forges community by simply being creative, fun and collective.

Notes

1. 澎湃 [*The Paper*]. 呼和浩特市应对新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情防控工作指挥部关于继续加强社会面管控的公告 [Announcement of the Hohhot city headquarters on continuing to strengthen social control for the prevention and control of novel coronavirus epidemic] https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_20201774. Retrieved on December 19 2023. 人民网 [*People's Daily Online*]. 高、低风险地区下一步如何管理？呼和浩特市回应 [How to manage high- and low-risk areas next? Hohhot City's response] http://nm.people.com.cn/n2/2022/1112/c196689-40192145.html. Retrieved on December 19 2023.
2. 第一财经 [*China Business Network*].呼和浩特警方通报'核酸检测结果造假'两人被采取刑事强制措施 [Hohhot police reported 'false nucleic acid test results': Two people were subject to criminal coercive measures] https://m.yicai.com/news/101593512.html. Retrieved on December 15 2023. 澎湃新闻 [*The Paper*]. 网今年以来，已有超11 家核酸检测机构因造假被立案查 [Since the beginning of this year, more than 11 nucleic acid testing institutions have been investigated for fraud] https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_20991351. Retrieved on December 15 2023.

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